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## Western Pacific asked to provide access to TB treatment

By HELEN FLORES

The World Health Organization (WHO) yesterday called on governments in the Western Pacific region, including the Philippines, to provide all citizens access to tuberculosis (TB) testing and treatment as part of universal health coverage.

Today is World Tuberculosis Day.

The WHO said "more needs to be done" as around 1.8 million people are newly infected with the disease in the region each year.

One in four people with TB is not getting treatment through public health programs.

In the Philippines, two to three people die of TB every hour. More than one million Filipinos have active TB and many are not even aware that they have the disease.

But WHO's latest data show a 14 percent reduction in the incidence of TB in the region over the past decade.

"The TB rate is coming down in the region, but it's not happening fast enough. We need to do much more to achieve our goal of ending the epidemic once and for all," said Shin Young-soo, WHO regional director for the Western Pacific.

The WHO said reducing costs and other barriers makes those infected with TB more likely to seek treatment early.

As result, they will recover faster, diminishing the chances of spreading the disease, and be able to resume healthy, productive lives.

"Universal health coverage can contribute to a substantial reduction in TB rates, while helping families avoid spiraling into poverty. Governments are beginning to realize that investing in universal health coverage actually saves money in the long run," Shin said.

In addition to improving coverage of existing services, including faster scale-up of new technologies, putting an end to TB in the region requires innovations in diagnostics, treatments, vaccines and service delivery, the WHO said.

WHO is calling on countries to address all the determinants of TB through high-level commitments and approaches that involve sectors outside of health, such as education and housing.

"By taking these steps, we inch ever closer to achieving our vision of zero deaths, zero disease and zero suffering due to TB," Shin said.

The region has seen progress, with TB treatment coverage increasing to 76 percent in 2016 from 69 percent in 2007.

The TB mortality rate in the region (five per 100,000 population in 2016) remains much lower than the global average (17 per 100,000), the WHO said.

\* DISEASE - TUBERCULOSIS

\* WHO - World Health Organization