



# World Health Organization

## Helping to Cure Tuberculosis in Iraq

I will volunteer myself to help dispel the stigma associated with tuberculosis in my society... I will never let tuberculosis destroy individuals' or families' lives...No patient should be blamed for being ill and should not have to hide or avoid treatment because of stigma", asserts 33-year-old Wisam Raheem, a father of two, who has just completed treatment for tuberculosis after suffering more than 10 years of psychological and physical distress.

Wisam's story started in 1997 when he first discovered that he had contracted tuberculosis; he decided not to go to a dispensary where he could be treated for the disease as he wanted to hide his condition from friends, family and neighbours because of the social stigma. He was also afraid that he would lose the woman he loved, whom he has since married.

In 2007 his life changed radically, finally had the courage to visit the centre for the national tuberculosis programme in Baghdad. At that time he was registered as a new tuberculosis patient. In 2008 his condition deteriorated dramatically, however, with the full support of his family, wife and children he was successfully treated through combination therapy and now he is a completely cured and very active member in the Stop TB initiative being implemented in his community.

### The national tuberculosis programme in Iraq

**TB is a major public health problem in Iraq affecting 16,000 people every year.** Each year around 3000 people in Iraq die from this respiratory disease primarily spread by coughing and sneezing, however; over the last year the prevalence of the disease decreased as a result of a successful Iraq national tuberculosis programme supported by WHO and funded by the Global Fund.

WHO has been supporting the national tuberculosis programme in the Ministry of Health in Iraq since 1954 and has been providing the programme with all the necessary support in the form of training, equipment, medications and technical assistance. In 1997 the NTP endorsed the implementation of the DOTS strategy in Iraq following the DOTS basic 5-point package, which is the first component of the Stop tuberculosis Strategy.

Iraq has achieved notable successes in the area of tuberculosis control; this success is attributable to the participation of the community and private practitioners and integrated care provided at the peripheral level.

The main drive behind Wisam overcoming his inner fear is the opportunity he had to be part of the Iraqi Stop TB initiative. "After I participated in a series of workshops and awareness

programmes I decided to tell my wife and representatives of the national tuberculosis programme that I had previously suffered from this disease and explained the reason behind my silence. I was relieved to reveal the truth".

Wisam has become an active member in his community working as a volunteer to support tuberculosis patients in order that they receive their treatment, raising the community's awareness of tuberculosis and accessing tuberculosis patients in their homes.

"I'll never forget the tears in the eyes of one desperate old woman when I visited her at her home, I held her hands and told her I was here to help her. I shared my own experience with her and walked with her to the nearest primary health care centre where she now goes to take her medication", Wissam said.

This case clearly demonstrates that with community support, personal commitment and the right treatment any tuberculosis patient can be cured and the involvement of tuberculosis patients is the cornerstone of any national tuberculosis programme.

