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The Editorial

THE HEALTH TSUNAMI: NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES - MDG PLUS AND BANGLADESH

Non-communicable Diseases (NCDs), include cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory disease accounting for 60% of all global deaths and 80% of these are in low and middle income countries. World Health Organization projects that NCD deaths will increase by 17% over the next decade worldwide. The maximum number of deaths will occur in the Western Pacific and South East Asia Regions.

Bangladesh is double-burdened with communicable and non-communicable diseases. We are facing new challenges from a rising incidence of conventional non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory diseases and their risk factors. Beside these there are other non-communicable diseases and conditions like injuries and violence, mental illness and blindness. Cardiovascular diseases are now among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in Bangladesh. The incidence of ischaemic heart disease and hypertensive are 14 and 20 percent of the adults per thousand populations respectively. Among the cancer patients in hospitals, lung cancer (29%) in men has the highest frequency followed by cervical (26%) and breast cancer (23%) in women. A recent WHO study estimated that there are 49,000 oral cancer, 71,000 laryngeal cancer and 196,000 lung cancer cases in Bangladesh among those aged 30 years or above. Five to Six percent of adults in Bangladesh are diabetic. Action to prevent these conditions will therefore focus on controlling these risk factors in an integrated manner. The nation-wide community based Bangladesh Health and Injury Survey (BHIS) that covered, 820,000 populations of all age groups found an estimated 70,000 annual deaths due to injury. The nation-wide survey on mental health (2003-5) revealed that sixteen percent of adult populations were suffering from some sorts of mental disorders. The Bangladesh National Blindness and Low Vision Survey 2000 observed that 1.5% of people aged 30 and above were visually impaired.

NCDs- The health tsunami did not arise in a day; it evolved over time and is getting worse. We need a revolution to change the trajectory if we are serious. The World Economic Forum's 2009 Global Risks report supports this with evidence that the incidence of chronic disease is rising across both the developed and developing world. Medical advances and awareness can reduce the risk severity but chronic non-communicable diseases are still the main cause of death worldwide. Evidence shows that up to 80% of NCDs can be prevented by addressing risk factors like unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and tobacco use and those that are non-preventable can be treated inexpensively with essential medicines. While medicines such as aspirin, penicillin, insulin and morphine have been on the Essential Medicines List for years, they remain beyond the reach of many.

The Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Programme (HNPS) is now in operation that responds to the increasing need for prevention and management of NCDs. Government has formulated National Non-communicable Diseases Strategy and Plan of Action. This initiative is one of the few initial partnership-based, concerted national responses to the global challenge of NCDs from within the developing countries. The active role of WHO as an international public health agency and other development partners with the global mandate for promoting best practices.

This national plan of action includes other non-communicable diseases and conditions like mental illnesses, injuries and blindness because of country requirements and addressed through synchronized public health measures within a common strategic framework. It has been modeled on an integrated approach to the prevention and control of NCDs and health promotion. Controlling common risk factors (such as tobacco consumption, alcohol abuse, physical inactivity, obesity, raised blood pressure, blood glucose and blood lipids) can lead to decrease in conventional NCDs. On the other hand, identification of the burden and risk factors and appropriate actions for prevention and management will help to reduce the injuries, mental illnesses and blindness. Therefore, surveillance and prevention of the risk factors and an integrated framework for action has addressed as priority issues in this policy document.

The Editorial

The UN MDGs state that health is critical to the economic, political and social development of all countries, yet they contain no goals or targets for NCDs, which are the largest threat to health systems. Recently, IDF, UICC and WHF together networks of health care professionals, patient, and civil society organizations from 170 countries have joined and urge ECOSOC to take immediate action to avert the fastest growing threat by non-communicable diseases (NCDs) to global health. The global call, issued by the three organizations at the meeting of the UN ECOSOC in Geneva, demands five essential actions:

1. Call for an 'MDG Plus' containing NCD progress indicators in the 2010 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) review;
2. Support the availability of essential medicines for people living with NCDs.
3. Support a UN General Assembly Special Session on NCDs.
4. Support the immediate and substantial increase of funding for NCDs.
5. Integrate NCD prevention into national health systems and the global development agenda.

The emerging epidemic of NCDs is threatening to overwhelm healthcare systems worldwide including Bangladesh. We are expecting UN to show the way in confronting this health crisis faced by millions of people throughout the world.

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