

»» Diabetes and heart disease – the next pandemic in developing countries?

No. 8, 23 May 2019



Author: Dr Anna-Maria von Roda
Editor: Nadine Kuch

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) already account for 70% of deaths around the world. These include many chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and mental disorders. The economic losses (disease-related production downtime and treatment costs) caused by NCDs in developing countries alone will amount to an estimated USD 47 billion by 2030. Although the relevance of these diseases, particularly in developing countries, will increase significantly in the future due to population growth and longer life expectancy, they are still overshadowed by traditional infectious diseases (measles, malaria, HIV/AIDS, etc.). The fight against infectious diseases will continue to be important, but the healthcare systems in these countries must adapt to the shift in the disease burdens early on to prevent these systems from collapsing.

People and systems are reaching their limits

NCDs are a burden in many respects for the people affected as well as for the healthcare system, the economy and the development of the respective country. The growing number of chronically ill people not only means human suffering, it also represents an enormous burden on the respective healthcare systems because the care of chronically ill patients requires medical staff, medication and services, often for their entire lives. Particularly in rural areas and fragile contexts in low-income countries, the population has little access to diagnostic procedures and high-quality therapies. Equipment and qualified personnel are also lacking.

Those affected are confronted with several challenges all at once: they have to live with health restrictions due to their illness, are often unable to work and at the same time run the risk of sliding into poverty due to high treatment costs, which they have to finance on their own. The average costs of therapy in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, represent almost 30% of the average annual income. The economic burden on households from chronic diseases therefore has a direct impact on global efforts to alleviate poverty.

Strong and well-funded healthcare systems needed

Many governments in partner countries have recognised the risks and are trying to raise the population's awareness of preventive lifestyles. This is still not enough. The healthcare systems in developing countries, which are often specialised in the treatment of infectious diseases as a result of their current focus, must adapt to the requirements of early detection and treatment of NCDs. This applies to the provision of diagnostic equipment and the ongoing training of healthcare personnel. At the same time, in order to ensure coverage of the foreseeable and long-term costs of treatment, national security schemes must be set up to finance illness.

Experts also view additional taxes on soft drinks, alcohol and tobacco as an effective remedy against the rise of chronic and non-communicable diseases. NCDs are often caused by an unhealthy diet and addictive substances. At the same time, tax revenue can be invested in alleviating poverty. These types of measures are indispensable if

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are to be achieved.

Multisectoral solutions are essential

Particularly in view of the growing challenges presented by NCDs, the situation also requires multisectoral approaches that include not only relevant government sectors but the private sector and civil society as well. The reason is that they can often only be prevented when the healthcare system cooperates with other systems. Occupational health and safety, education, nutrition, housing, road safety and environmental protection are just some of the sectors that are imperative for prevention.

Experts are aware of the importance of NCDs in every respect. Rethinking policies and initiating appropriate measures both internationally and nationally is necessary to minimise the economic and health impacts on people and the system. ■

Literature

Jan, St. et al. (2019): Action to address the household economic burden of non-communicable diseases. In: Lancet Series; The Lancet Taskforce on NCDs and economics, Volume 391, Issue 10134, pp. 2047-2058, URL: [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)30323-4.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(18)30323-4.pdf)