For the past 23 years, Inda Tshering has been at the frontline of Bhutan’s public health mission.

The solidly-built health assistant is stationed at Dawakha Basic Health Unit II, a primary health facility located in the country’s spectacular Paro Valley. Though the health issues affecting Tshering’s community have varied over the years, according to him there has been a tangible increase in the number of type 2 diabetes cases.

“The numbers of diabetes cases have been increasing. In my catchment area alone I have around 4-5 cases under medication,” he says, adding with concern, “I am sure there are many undiagnosed cases.”

Type 2 diabetes is largely the outcome of inappropriate diet and inadequate physical activity, with increased incidence associated with the ageing process. If improperly managed, diabetes can cause serious damage to every major organ system in the body, resulting in kidney failures, eye damage, heart attacks, strokes and nerve damage.

Tshering’s observations are indicative of wider trends. In the year 2000 there were approximately 35,000 people with diabetes in Bhutan. By 2030 that number is expected to surge more than threefold, to 109,000.
While the increase in cases can partly be explained by greater screening and awareness among health workers such as Tshering, it is also a natural function of Bhutan’s demographic changes. Bhutan’s population is ageing: Low fertility rates and greater life expectancy have meant the proportion of the population over 65 years of age will increase from 4.4% in 2000 to 7.3% by 2025.

WHO Representative to Bhutan Dr Ornella Lincetto says that a rise in diabetes and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is expected: “The ageing process increases the likelihood of contracting diabetes. As in other developing countries the diabetes epidemic in Bhutan is being driven by rapid urbanization and associated changes in diet and lifestyle, which is adding to the demographic phenomenon and is being exacerbated by long-practiced behaviors,” she says. “Knowing this gives us the ability to first, enhance people’s capacity to modify their behavior and take preventative action; and second, enhance services to promote early detection and management of the disease.”

Bhutan’s government has been pro-active. In 2014 it initiated the country-wide rollout of WHO’s Package of Essential Non-Communicable Disease Interventions (PEN) which provides health care workers the tools to detect and manage NCDs in their communities. And in July 2015 authorities approved a Multi-sectoral Action Plan to tackle NCDs, thereby synchronizing national efforts with WHO’s regional strategy.

According to Dr Pandup Tshering, Director of the Ministry of Health’s Department of Medical Services, traditional health interventions must be reinforced by innovative, multi-sector action.

“Improving the health system to ensure early detection and treatment is vital to our efforts,” Dr Pandup says. “But we also need to think more deeply about our approach. Modifying unhealthy behaviors needs multi-sector cooperation to create ‘healthy-settings’ and promote positive decision-making.”

Though Bhutan has strong regulatory restrictions on commercial alcohol and tobacco use, traditional habits that increase the risk of diabetes remain widely practiced. The doma, which is a mild stimulant, is chewed by 60% of the adult population; the locally brewed alcoholic drink ‘ara’ continues to be imbibed in worrying quantities; and for many, consumption of high-salt and high-fat foods and beverages such as salted pork, pickles and butter tea is a daily occurrence.

Promoting awareness of how these habits contribute to diabetes, as well as how regular exercise can help maintain a healthy weight and thereby keep the disease at bay, is being prioritized.

“We work closely with the central monastic body to encourage healthy lifestyles among monks. Similarly, we are working with other sectors, like the education sector, to instill good health habits among students. Bhutan has strong health coverage, so we need to really get these positive messages through,” Dr Pandup says.

As Bhutan’s public health journey unfolds, tackling diabetes and other NCDs effectively will prove a major test. Present resolve gives reason to be confident.