Diabetes affects millions of people across the world. In 2014 there were an estimated 422 million adults with diabetes, a four-fold rise since 1980. Much of this increase is among people living in low- and middle-income countries, which account for nearly 80% of the burden of diabetes. Diabetes is now the eighth leading cause of death worldwide. Younger age groups are increasingly being affected. Diabetes not only burdens individuals with catastrophic medical expenditures but also families due to loss of wages. Societies and governments also suffer losses due to reduced labour productivity and premature death. The total health-care expenditure on diabetes worldwide was US$ 612 billion in 2013, estimated to account for around 11% of global health-care expenditure. The losses in gross domestic product (GDP) worldwide due to diabetes from 2010 to 2030 are estimated to be US$ 1.7 trillion. Diabetes is therefore as much a developmental issue as it is a health issue.

The South-East Asia Region is home to approximately 96 million persons with diabetes and this figure is expected to increase in the coming decades. It is a matter of great concern that half of the people affected by diabetes in the Region remain undiagnosed and untreated, resulting in serious complications such as retinopathy, kidney disease, stroke, heart attack and premature death. The rising trend in the prevalence of diabetes is linked to demographic, epidemiological and socioeconomic transitions sweeping across the Region. Urbanization and changed lifestyles have increased sedentary behaviour in adults, while the consumption of energy-dense food has affected childhood obesity rates.

Although diabetes is a serious problem, it is preventable and treatable. Type 2 diabetes – which accounts for 90% of all diabetes cases – can be largely avoided or delayed if individuals make lifestyle changes, such as adopting a healthy diet, increasing physical activity, and maintaining a healthy body weight. Moreover, those already affected by diabetes can be treated, and can lead long and healthy lives free of complications. The 2016 World Health Day, therefore, is dedicated to diabetes; it aims to inform individuals, societies and governments of the need for urgent action to halt the rising tide of diabetes.
In addition to individual-level interventions, it is imperative that governments create conducive and enabling environments for people to adopt healthier lifestyles. Fiscal and legislative measures are needed to reduce the consumption of foods high in fat, sugar and salt, and promote a healthy diet rich in vegetables and fruit. Marketing of unhealthy food and beverages to children must be restricted. Public spaces for walking, playing and bicycling should be increased.

Mass media campaigns and social marketing that can influence positive change and promote healthy behaviours need to be stepped up. Schools, workplaces and other institutions need to integrate healthy eating and physical activity into daily routines and promote healthy lifestyles. Communities can promote healthy lifestyles through a number of ways, including establishing walking clubs and sports competitions, as well as through local public awareness campaigns.

Health promotion and prevention efforts must be complemented by a resilient health system equipped with core capacities for early diagnosis, treatment and surveillance. Antidiabetic medicines and life-saving insulin are unavailable in many health facilities, and are often purchased by patients at unaffordable costs. This must change. Health facilities, including those catering to far-flung rural communities and marginalized groups, should have constant access to diabetes screening tools and medicines for treatment, including insulin. Screening and management of gestational diabetes among pregnant women should become a standard of care. Provision of these basic services must be part of the wider commitment to realize universal health coverage.

All of this requires great commitment and effort. But it is achievable. The global voluntary target to “halt the rise in diabetes and obesity” by 2025, and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goal to “reduce premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) by one third” by 2030 needs concerted action for achievement. While an appreciable level of momentum has been generated in all Member States, we need to see more happening on the ground. On World Health Day, I call upon everybody – governments, communities and individuals – to do their bit to prevent, treat and beat diabetes.

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