Message from WHO Representative to India
World Health Day 2016

This World Health Day 2016, with its focus on 'diabetes', presents an excellent opportunity to turn our attention on one of the most pressing public health priorities of our times, globally and in India: noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that globally, high blood glucose is the third leading risk factor for premature mortality after high blood pressure and tobacco use. The overall risk of premature death among people with diabetes is at least double the risk of their non-diabetic peers.

Globally, the number of people living with diabetes was estimated to be 422 million (8.5% of adults 18 years and over) in 2014.

In 2015, an estimated 7.8% adults in India had diabetes. A large number of those with diabetes are unaware of their status. Even when this is known, many do not access regular treatment for various reasons like lack of availability, affordability or awareness about the need for adherence to treatment. Diabetes can lead to complications that may cause blindness, kidney failure or loss of limbs. High blood sugar that has not reached the diabetes threshold can also increase the risk of heart diseases, strokes and other complications.

The rising prevalence of diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases is driven by a combination of factors: rapid urbanization, sedentary lifestyle, unhealthy diet and increasing life expectancy.

The good news is that a large proportion of diabetes cases are preventable. Interventions to promote healthy diet and physical activity have been shown to be effective in preventing or delaying the onset of type 2 diabetes among people at high risk. Maintaining normal body weight, engaging in regular physical activity and eating a healthy diet can reduce the risk of diabetes.

Diabetes is treatable; it can be controlled and managed to prevent complications. Increasing access to diagnosis and affordable treatment, including patient education for self-care, are vital components of the response. Reduction of blood glucose can be achieved through medication and lifestyle changes.
In addition to posing a significant public health challenge, diabetes also causes considerable economic burden on the individual and the family, and increases the cost of care for the health system. Loss of productivity due to morbidity and premature mortality further increases the economic impact.

Low income families bear the highest burden of diabetes. While hospitalization and complications are major components of the costs of diabetes, drug costs constitute an important part of the expenses, often representing more than 50% of total direct costs for households.

The Global Report on Diabetes (April 2016) describes the burden and consequences and advocates for stronger health systems for improved surveillance, enhanced prevention and more effective management of diabetes.

India was one of the first countries to adopt the Global Monitoring Framework for prevention and control of NCDs. The National Action Plan and Monitoring Framework for prevention and control of NCDs identifies ten targets to achieve the goal of 25% reduction in mortality due to NCDs by 2025. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further strengthen this commitment.

Efforts to prevent and treat diabetes will be important to achieve the global SDG 3 target of reducing premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2030.

Diabetes and the other common NCDs share common risk factors. Everyone has a role to play in preventing and reducing these risk factors. Governments, health-care providers, people with diabetes and those who care for them, civil society, food producers, and manufacturers and suppliers of medicines, technology are all important stakeholders.

In this context, the National Multisectoral Action Plan developed by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India is a step in the right direction. It provides a framework to support and strengthen integration of NCD prevention strategies within the plans and programmes of the non-health sector.

WHO works with Member States, civil society and other partners to increase awareness about the burden of diabetes, its health and economic consequences, and to promote effective and affordable interventions for prevention and management of diabetes.

Diabetes and other NCDs represent a challenge to public health and national development. It is therefore imperative that we tackle this challenge now than later. Let us all resolve to ‘beat diabetes’ by scaling up prevention, strengthening care and enhancing surveillance.

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