WHO and UNAIDS conduct a review of HIV and TB collaborative activities in Myanmar together with MoH

In January 2016 the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNAIDS carried out an in-depth review of the current status of Tuberculosis and HIV in Myanmar and of the collaborative activities implemented to address these diseases. The review was conducted in close collaboration with the National Tuberculosis and AIDS Programmes of the Ministry of Health, and with financial support from USAID and the Global Fund against AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Myanmar has made impressive progress in the fight against HIV and TB, being successful in halting and reversing the spread of the diseases in line with the 2015 Millennium Development Goals. However, despite these progresses, tuberculosis and HIV remain two major public health threats, condemning many to premature death, unnecessary suffering and economic losses. If these two diseases infect patients at the same time, the physical and economic burden can become unsustainable – and the mortality rates increase dramatically.

Co-infection of TB and HIV was responsible for around 4,100 deaths in Myanmar in 2014 out of the estimated 32,000 deaths for all TB forms; the country ranks as ‘high-burden’ for both TB and HIV incidence, and has a high rate of HIV-TB co-infections. To address this, the World Health Organization and UNAIDS recommend 1) a strong collaboration between the National TB and AIDS Programmes, aimed at strengthening the mechanisms for delivering integrated TB and HIV services; 2) measures to reduce the burden of TB in HIV-infected individuals, and 3) measures to reduce the HIV burden amongst TB patients.

In light of these policy requirements, the Ministry of Health is stepping up the efforts to tackle the combined epidemic of HIV and tuberculosis in Myanmar. WHO and UNAIDS support the call for improved coordination between all partners involved in the national TB and HIV response. In particular, all doctors – public and private – should strive to link TB and HIV patients to the free diagnosis and treatment services made available by the Government of Myanmar and their implementing partners.

The key recommendations of the review shared with the Ministry of Health focused on the importance of strengthening collaboration between HIV and TB National Programmes, through improved information sharing, joint procurement and adequate deployment of human resources. Furthermore, increasing and decentralizing the number of health facilities which provide joint screenings and treatment of patients for HIV and TB at all levels of the health system (through scaling up of services and employing mobile teams particularly in high burden areas) would be central to ensure that these diseases are timely detected, properly treated and further reduced. Lastly, engagement with all partners – including the private sector – would boost the effectiveness of health policies by devising and implementing innovative service delivery strategies.
WHO supports a workshop to review current practices and recommend actions for Entomology and Vector-control in Myanmar

Myanmar made great progress in the fight against malaria and other mosquito-borne diseases during the Millennium Development Goals era. Malaria cases and deaths in the country have declined by 61% and 93% respectively in 2014 compared to 2007, and the efforts of the Government of Myanmar and of all malaria partners ensured remarkable success against this deadly disease. However, in order to achieve the new goal of Malaria elimination by 2030 and be better prepared to face emerging health challenges – such as Zika virus, for instance, or the emergence and spread of artesiminin-resistant malaria – current efforts in the field of entomology and vector-control must be carefully reviewed and evaluated to inform future best practices.

To this end, WHO organised a workshop on entomology and vector-control practices, calling all partners working in entomology in Myanmar to come together and coordinate efforts to prevent duplication and maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of these activities in the country. The achievements in malaria control in Myanmar have so far been largely dependent on the investments on vector-control practices like the use of Long Lasting Insecticidal Nets (LLINs) and Indoor Residual Spraying (IRS). It is necessary therefore to review and evaluate these strategies to consider options for better targeted interventions, management of insecticidal resistance and tackling residual malaria transmission, in particular outdoor transmission.

During the workshop, members of the Ministry of Health’s National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP), partners and WHO shared experiences, challenges and lessons learnt from the extensive vector-control work conducted in Myanmar and in the Greater Mekong sub-region. As remarked by Dr U Zaw Lin, Deputy Director of the Department of Public Health and Chair of the meeting, a stronger partnership approach for entomology and vector-control strategies in Myanmar will be key to ensure continued progress in the fight against malaria and other diseases, and will inform the programming of the Malaria National Strategic Plan 2016-2020 of the Ministry of Health.

The discussions and presentations of the workshop resulted in a series of ‘action steps’ to be implemented with the collaboration and coordination of all partners involved. These range from the development of updated guidelines and operating procedures for entomology and vector-control strategies, to the identification of new entomological surveillance sentinel sites across Myanmar to assess their effectiveness. By implementing these and other activities as part of the coordinated National Malaria Strategy and Action Plan, the NMCP and its partners will be able to further progress on the successful path towards malaria burden reduction and elimination in the country. WHO will continue to provide support to NMCP to coordinate with partners for the implementation of laboratory, surveillance and other activities.
Findings of the 2014 Myanmar STEPS survey on Diabetes Mellitus and NCDs risk factors presented in Nay Pyi Taw

The WHO STEPwise approach to non-communicable disease (NCD) risk factor surveillance – the STEPS Survey - focuses on obtaining core data on the established risk factors that determine the disease burden of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases in a country. By using the same standardized questions and protocols, all countries can use STEPS information not only for monitoring in-country trends, but also for making comparisons across countries.

The Ministry of Health conducted STEPS surveys on adult risk factors surveillance in Myanmar in 2003, 2009 and 2014. Amongst these three surveys, the 2014 one is the most comprehensive, providing an analysis of all States and Regions within Myanmar through not only questionnaires and physical measurements – STEPs 1 and 2 of the survey – but also with data obtained through biochemical measurements (STEP 3).

The STEPS survey was initiated by the MoH in December 2014 with the technical support of WHO Headquarters, regional and country offices. WHO provided support for the training of interviewers and by providing instruments for data collection – e.g. weighing machines, stadiometers, automated digital sphygmomanometers and other equipment. Dr. Lubna Ishaq Bhatti an Dr. Stephan Savin, from the Department of Prevention of Non-communicable Diseases of WHO HQ, assisted the team with training and data processing and analysis.

The results of the 2014 Survey were officially presented at a ceremony in Nay Pyi Taw in February 2016. H.E. Dr Than Aung, Union Minister of Health, delivered the inaugural address on the importance of analysing and controlling the burden of Diabetes and other NCDs in Myanmar. This was followed by presentations on the survey methodology and on key findings by Dr. Ko Ko, Programme Manager of the Diabetes Control Project and Head of the Department of Medicine at University of Medicine 2, Yangon and Dr. Ko Ko Zaw, Deputy Director from Department of Medical Research.

National Seminar on Comprehensive Oncology Healthcare Services in Myanmar conducted in January 2016

On 11 January 2016, Directors General and senior officials from the Ministry of Health joined university rectors and professors from the Universities of Medicine, senior pathologists and medical and radiation oncologists to take part in a national seminar on comprehensive Oncology Healthcare Services in Myanmar. At the heart of the seminar were discussions on the improvement and expansion of comprehensive cancer care services in Myanmar.

According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), cancer cases and deaths will be rising substantially in Myanmar by 2030; incidence is projected to increase by 66% and deaths by 74%. The provision of cancer care services will thus become a central part of the health system in the country.

Different aspects of cancer control and care were discussed during the seminar, including the need to build a population-based cancer registry, the expansion of training and curricula for human resources in radiation, medical and clinical oncology, as well as cancer pathology and palliative care. International and national experts from Japan, the United States, Singapore, Thailand IARC and WHO, as well as from Yangon General Hospital, Nay Pyi Taw General Hospital and Shwe Yaung Hnin Si Foundation participated in the discussions and presentations.

Dr. Ophira Ginsburg, Medical Officer for Non Communicable Disease Management (MND) from WHO Headquarters, attended the conference and presented on the key topic of prioritisation and planning for National Cancer Control. WHO has committed its full support to assist the Ministry of Health of Myanmar in the development of the National Cancer Control Plan.
WHO Myanmar participates in the 8th Asia Pacific Conference on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Nay Pyi Taw

Improving access to reproductive and sexual health and ensuring health rights across Asia-Pacific was the main focus of the Asia Pacific Conference on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (8APCSRHR), in its eight edition this year. The Conference was hosted in Myanmar by the Ministry of Health and the Maternal and Child Welfare Association, with support from WHO and other partners like UNFPA and the 3MDG Fund.

The Conference saw the participation of hundreds of experts, academics and health professionals from countries across Asia and the Pacific, from Pakistan to Fiji islands. Improving access to sexual and reproductive health in light of the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through sharing of knowledge, lessons learnt and best practices was the overarching theme of the Conference.

WHO Myanmar was one of the key actors present at the conference. The Country Representative, Dr Jorge Luna, delivered a key note address where he highlighted the global successes achieved by the Asia Pacific region in the field of sexual and reproductive health but also discussed the challenges ahead in light of the new 2030 targets of the SDGs. As he remarked, “most components of sexual and reproductive health such as family planning, prevention of unsafe abortion, eliminating harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, addressing violence against women, and ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services are included in the SDG under different goals and targets.”

WHO Myanmar also hosted a Symposium during the conference on the topic of ‘Moving from MDGs to SDGs for improving maternal and child health’, where a panel of key note speakers discussed the challenges in this current transition. Dr Neena Reina, Head of Maternal, Newborn and Child Health department of WHO Regional Office, gave an overview of the future steps and targets for maternal health interventions. She was joined in her discussion by Dr Chithramalee de Silva from the Sri Lankan Ministry of Health and by Dr. Hnin Hnin Lwin, Deputy Director of Maternal and Reproductive Health, and Dr. Myint Myint Than Director of Child Health, both of the Myanmar MoH.

Celebrating World Tuberculosis Day 2016 in Myanmar

On 24th March 2016 H.E. Dr Than Aung, Union Minister of Health, WHO representatives and all health partners involved in the fight against Tuberculosis in Myanmar got together at the Ministry of Health in Nay Pyi Taw to celebrate World Tuberculosis Day, under the slogan ‘Unite to End TB’.

Tuberculosis represents a major public health concern in Myanmar, with rates of infections for TB, drug-resistant TB and TB-HIV co-infection being amongst the highest in the WHO South East Asia region. Addressing the disease by reinforcing service provision and improving affordable and high-quality care remains a top priority for the Ministry of Health in Myanmar.

At the event, H.E. Dr Than Aung delivered an opening speech calling for action and joint efforts to continue reducing the TB burden in Myanmar; he then visited the exhibition at the Ministry where WHO and other health partners presented results and data about their TB activities in the country.
Ceremony for Professor Htin Zaw Soe, winner of the 17th Jacques Parisot Foundation Fellowship award

On 4th March 2016 in WHO Myanmar Country Office Dr Jorge Luna, on behalf of WHO headquarters, Department of Governing Bodies and External Relations, awarded the 17th Jacques Parisot Foundation Fellowship medal to Professor Dr Htin Zaw Soe, one of the most renowned research scientists in Myanmar.

Prof. Soe, currently working as Acting Rector for the University of Community Health, Magway, has extensive professional experiences which include teaching and training health professionals, conducting social and biological research and of course delivering health services to the community.

The Jacques Parisot Foundation, which was established in 1969, encourages research in social medicine or public health by granting a fellowship, which is awarded every two years. Prof Htin Zaw Soe is the first Myanmar researcher who receives this prestigious award. His research project on “Pilot Studies on Newly Developed Botanical Larvicides and Repellents against Aedes Mosquitoes in Myanmar”, aimed at devising an innovative environmental-friendly vector control tool, was selected by the Panel of WHO Executive Board to receive the award. He was awarded a medal along with a grant of USD 5,000 as recognition of his important studies in the field of vector-control in Myanmar.

Courtesy visits to WHO Myanmar country office

From top to bottom:
1) The Dean of the Philippines University of Nursing, Dr Lourdes Tejero, and former Dean, Prof. Josefina Tuazon together with Consul Maria Lourdes M. Salcedo visit WHO and the Reproductive, Maternal and Child Health programme.

2) Members of the Faculty of Health Sciences of Queen’s University, Kingston, Canada visit Dr Luna at WHO Office. From left to right (rear): Dr. Eva Purkey, Dr. Heather Aldersey, Dr. Shruti Sebastian, Dr. Hugh Guan; (front) Dr. Colleen Davison, Dr. Susan Bartels.

3) Mr Yoshiro Takano, Counselor, BHN Association (NGO), from Tokyo, Japan pays a visit to Dr Luna in WHO Myanmar office.