



Photo Credit: WHO, Timor-Leste



Photo Credit, UNMIT, Timor-Leste

WCO-TLS/ PR 030/05/2014

Strengthening TB prevention and control in Timor-Leste

Each year, 3 million people get sick with TB in the WHO South-East Asia Region. It is estimated that one third of these people do not get the TB services they need. TB is curable, but current efforts to find, treat and cure everyone who gets ill with the disease are not sufficient. Timor-Leste has one of the highest TB prevalence rate in WHO South-East Asia Region. In order to raise awareness about the burden of this disease, the National TB Control Program celebrated World TB day in all 13 districts under the theme 'Reaching the missing cases in Timor-Leste: A test, treatment and cure for all.'

Each district focused on different campaign activities and target groups, hosting marches, workshops and TB screenings among community members, students and prisoners. As part of the World TB Day commemoration in Ermera, a motorcade drove through the surrounding villages and town centre of Gleno with Ministry of Health staff announcing TB health messages to the community.



National TB Control Program and District Health Service staff give public health messages on TB to the community

After the campaign, a workshop was held in the private university East Timor Coffee Institute with over 75 students taking part. The determinants, transmission and treatment of TB disease were explained and the national, regional and global TB burden was highlighted. During the first quarter of 2014, there were 275 active cases of TB in Ermera, with over 90 new cases detected. Despite the high prevalence of TB, it is a fully curable disease when the full course of medication is completed. Timor-Leste has a high cure rate of 91%, when compared with other countries throughout the region.

After the workshop, Gregorio Colo, a 24 year old forestry student from Oecusse expressed the importance of the World TB Day event saying that "we learned a lot about what exactly is the disease TB and how to prevent it, which we the students can explain further to the community. Previously I had received information from the TV and radio about TB but it was not detailed, so today the information was very useful." Gregory also noted that if he had a cough for over two weeks he would visit the nearest health facility to take a TB test.

The Manager of the National TB Control Program (NTP), Sr. Constantino Lopes explained the focus for the NTP over the coming 12 months. A five-year National TB Strategy is under development in collaboration with WHO. This strategy will be finalized in June 2014 and rolled out in 2015. As part of this strategy, all health workers will be trained on the new WHO protocol for drugs regimen and treatment of TB. Currently patients must take TB medication for between 6 and 8 months, but this is now being increased to 8 months. The National TB Control program will also focus on strengthening the diagnosis of the disease, by improving the quality of laboratories and human resource capacity.

Sr. Constantino Lopes appealed to the community that “if have a cough for more than 2 weeks, please come to the health centre for a TB sputum test, don’t wait until the cough has blood. Even though TB is easy to transmit it is curable. Come to the community health centre and then get the treatment.” If TB remains untreated, it can cause severe health complications, increase the risk of drug resistance and lead to higher TB mortality. It can also spread to other members of the community if precautions are not taken.



**Students listen attentively during
World TB Day presentations**

Acknowledging the root causes of TB, such as low nutrition, poverty, and environmental factors, Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region, stated that relying on treatment and drugs alone cannot beat TB, because TB is a condition strongly influenced by the environment in which people live. To reach the unreached or the hard to reach, in the long term, the only way is the primary health-care approach, with increased focus on community awareness and engagement on tuberculosis. “All sections of society must work together to address the underlying social determinants and provide adequate economic and social support. If we are successful, we can ensure that we meet the Millennium Development Goals, accelerate the fight against TB and start to talk realistically about eliminating TB as a public health problem in the next two decades,” stated Dr. Khetrpal Singh.



Ministry of Health staff, District Health Service staff, Dr. Lungten Wangchuk, WHO Technical Adviser TB, Sr Constantino Lopes, National TB Control Program Manager and students from East Timor Coffee Institute, Ermera