WHO bolster plans for blood transfusion service development in Timor-Leste

Safe blood saves millions of lives each year. However, access to safe and sufficient blood supplies remains a challenge in many developing countries, including Timor-Leste. This can severely compromise a patient’s treatment and at times result in death. In order to accelerate progress on the development of blood transfusion services, the Ministry of Health hosted a consultative workshop in the National Hospital Guido Valadares, on July 3rd, 2014 to develop the country’s first ever ‘National Blood Policy’ and ‘National Blood Programme Strategic Plan 2015-2019.’

During his opening remarks, Minister of Health, H.E. Dr. Sergio Lobo, Spb, stated that blood services and systems need to be strengthened in Timor-Leste in order to save many additional lives. Dr. Lobo assured that “Ministry of Health will take all necessary steps to establish, implement and support nationally-coordinated, efficiently-managed, sustainable, blood and plasma programmes” and acknowledged the challenges in reaching 100% development of blood transfusion services immediately. For this, interim, step by step, action plans and coordinated support from development partners would be needed.

At the Ministry of Health’s request, WHO consultant and international expert on Transfusion Medicine, Dr. Zarin Bharucha, undertook a research mission in Timor-Leste and presented her findings and recommendations for the National Blood Policy and National Blood Programme Strategic Plan (2015-2019). Dr. Bharucha’s key recommendations include; establishing a nationally coordinated Blood Transfusion Service; a National Regulatory Authority; developing national standards following WHO recommendations for all procedures of transfusion from recruitment of donors to monitoring recipients “vein to vein”; and the collection of blood only from voluntary non-remunerated donors from low risk populations. During the workshop, Dr. Bharucha acknowledged that the gap between the blood services that are available and what is required is very large, but with stepwise plans, strong political will and support from partners, it will be possible to bridge this disparity in future.
WHO recommends for 100% of blood supplies to come from voluntary, non-remunerated donors as this is the safest, most dependable supply. However, Timor-Leste only receives 63% of blood supplies from voluntary, unpaid donors; the rest of the blood supply is dependent on patient’s relatives. Community mobilization for blood donation only takes place in Dili district and blood is only collected when required. For elective surgeries relatives are requested to bring donors and at times during emergencies defense and police personnel are requested to donate blood. Blood transfusions are presently only available at six referral hospitals (Dili, Baucau, Suai, Maliana, Oecusse and Maubisse). Therefore seven districts lack access to blood transfusions, resulting in a high number of mortalities each year.

As WHO have been at the forefront of the movement to improve global blood safety since 1975, WHO Representative to Timor-Leste, Dr. Jorge Mario Luna, reaffirmed WHO’s commitment to strengthening blood services and systems in Timor-Leste, by providing technical advice and expertise to the Ministry of Health as requested, in order to develop strategies and oversee the implementation of the plans developed at this workshop. H.E. Dr. Lobo thanked WHO for their continuous support in developing several Strategies and Plans to align with the National Health Sector Strategic Plan (2011-2030) under the “EU-WHO Universal Health Coverage Partnership in Timor-Leste: Supporting policy dialogue on national health policies, strategies and plans for universal health coverage” including the National Blood Bank Policy and National Blood Programme Strategic Plan (2015-2019).

The most senior representatives from health institutions and organizations were present demonstrating the high level commitment and importance of strengthening blood services in Timor-Leste. Among those present were the Minister of Health, Dr. Sergio Gama Lobo Spb, World Health Organization Representative to Timor-Leste, Dr. Jorge Mario Luna, Dr. Joao Pedro, Clinical Director of Hospital Services, HNGV, Dr. Jose Gusmao Guterres, HNGV Hospital Director, the Executive Director of the National Laboratory, Dr. Maria Santina de Jesus Gomes and Pathology Program Manager, St. John of God Health Care, Dr. Anthea Ramos, Head of National Blood Bank, Arsenio Jose Afonso, USAID, HADIAK, Cruz Vermelha Timor-Leste (CVTL) laboratory technicians and healthcare workers.

Dr. Bharucha will revise the National Blood Policy and National Blood Programme Strategic Plan according to the ideas and suggestions which stemmed from the workshop. The finalized policy and plan will be presented by Ministry of Health to the Council of Directors later this year and it is hoped that implementation will commence in 2015. Blood services are the cornerstone of modern health systems and strengthening this service will bring the Timorese Government one step closer to achieving their vision set out in the National Health Sector Strategic Plan (2011-2030) “Towards a Healthy East Timorese People in a Healthy Timor-Leste.”