

South Sudan should address non-communicable diseases

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“The greatest impact in fighting NCDs can be achieved by creating healthy public policies”

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) as “diseases that are not passed from person to person” and “are of long duration and generally slow progression”. Sometimes referred to as ‘chronic diseases’, NCDs include a range of conditions such as cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes.

NCDs are estimated to claim the lives of up to 38 million people globally each year, with three quarter of these deaths in low and middle income countries, and cardiovascular disease accounting for the bulk of the cases, according to WHO. Certain risk factors such as physical inactivity, unhealthy diets, abdominal obesity, and use and abuse of alcohol and tobacco increase the likelihood of dying from an NCD.

The prevalence of NCDs is unknown in South Sudan. As the country builds its health system, the issue of the emerging NCD burden should not be ignored. Anecdotal evidence showed an increase in cases of cardiovascular accidents as a result of hypertensive disorders and diabetes, as well as cases of cancers in the country. It is increasingly common to hear of people who had a stroke, died of breast or cervical cancer, or were amputated because of the effects of uncontrolled diabetes. With no systematic data collection or reporting on the NCDs, these conditions may be severely underrated.

With the risk factors widely known, preventative measures should be put in place to ensure that NCDs are controlled. The establishment of the unit for NCDs at the National Ministry of Health is step in the right direction. More needs to be done to curb the danger. It needs inter –ministerial and inter-departmental collaborations with other institutions such as the Ministries of Education, Finance, and Youth and Sports, among others, in a multi-faceted approach in order to lessen the risk factors.

The Ministry of Health should: ensure that robust data on the current occurrences of NCDs are captured and analyzed through the Health Management Information System (HMIS); establish cancer registries and screening programmes to track the diseases; and increase awareness of early detection and treatment at all levels of health care. The government should encourage participation in sports to lessen inactivity among the youth, enact legislation to regulate the use of alcohol and tobacco, take steps to improve diets, apportion the necessary resources and political will and include health in all public policies.

And finally, WHO has emphasized that “the greatest impact can be achieved by creating healthy public policies that promote NCD prevention and control and reorienting health systems to address the needs of people with such diseases”.