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Caribbean Nations Push for Resolution to Address Non-Communicable Diseases

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By Amy Lieberman

UNITED NATIONS – Non-Communicable, or transferable, diseases, like diabetes and cancer, account for more than 60 percent of the global deaths, 40 percent of which are premature, yet no international resolution or convention recognizes this growing trend.



The Caribbean Community Initiative on Non-Communicable Diseases, or CARICOM, is now appealing to member nations – and soon, to the General Assembly as a whole – with a resolution that will unite nations in the fight against non-communicable diseases, which have a direct link to not only people’s health, but also to social and economic development, .

“Non-communicable diseases are an epidemic that is increasing in all parts of the world, including developing countries, having a negative impact on their social and economic development,” said Ala Alwan, Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organization, at a United Nations Secretariat press briefing this afternoon. “The major problem that many countries face is that the prevention and control is non-communicable diseases is not integrated into the global development agenda.”

The lack of inclusion of non-communicable diseases in the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals, for instance, leads to a scattered approach in tackling these diseases, which typically fall under three major classifications: Cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure and chronic lung disease, according to Alwan.

Asthma, allergies and other non-transmittable diseases would also be classified as an NCD, which is largely caused by lifestyle and environmental factors, like inactivity, smoking and air pollution.

Low-income Caribbean nations tend hold particularly high rates of NCDs.

Mortality rates from diabetes in Trinidad and Tobago, for instance, are 700 percent greater than those in Canada, according to Alafia Samuels, an epidemiologist at the University of the West Indies, who also spoke at the press conference.

Dealing with the physical implications of having diabetes is only the start of the battle for those diagnosed – treatment costs can quickly become astronomical, standing to “drive families into poverty,” Alwan said.

“The cost of treating one family member with diabetes costs more than 50 percent of the household income,” he furthered. “Management and treatment of cancer, heart disease and invasive techniques, like open heart surgery, can also be catastrophic expenditures... nine million people are dying before the age of 60 each year because of this, and you can only imagine how much productivity is lost from work, illness, premature death.”

Donatus St. Aimee, the Permanent Representative of St. Lucia, offered Europa Newswire a personal example of how NCDs can rip into an average Caribbean family – his family. His mother died of diabetes and his two younger sisters have also been diagnosed with the disease, which in some cases is genetic, but is also attributed to kinds of food intake.

“The cost of treatment in our household is very high, and you could say we are middle class, so if the cost of treatment is really affecting us, you could just think about what is going on in households that have lower income brackets,” St. Aimee explained.

Caribbean patients also have to frequently travel to other major islands for basic dialysis treatment, for instance, setting them back further in their finances.

While these diseases could hamper people’s abilities to work and produce goods, thus affecting the economic and social development in their countries, urbanization also presents unique challenges, especially in the Caribbean, where space is precious and increasingly occupied by houses and commercial strips. St. Aimee noted that leisure and sports activities must be planned, accordingly, and that children no longer receive the same amount of exercise in their daily routines.

Caribbean countries united to discuss this issue, as well as tactics for lessening this tendency, first in 2007, the officials noted. They have since branched out to other nations, including Brazil, which was represented at the press conference by Deborah Malta, Coordinator of the Department of NCDs in Brazil’s Ministry of Health.

Brazil is all too familiar with the impact NCDs can have on a population – the prevalence of tobacco use there has increased from 39 percent in 1996 to 50 percent this year, Malta noted. The government is now working to develop better advertising and educational initiatives to combat the trend.

Mexico, Bangladesh and Chile are examples of other nations that have recently logged on to CARICOM’s cause and will jointly appeal to the GA in the coming months.

“It’s important that we have an international understanding that this is just as much an economics issue, or a financial issue, as it is a health issue. This affects the development of every country in the world and that is why we are bringing this issue to the UN to ensure we have as much cooperation as possible,” St. Aimes explained.

Photo by: Luiz Rampelotto

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