

Blood pressure killing the world's workers while banks and drug firms stand idle

In a today's issue of *The Lancet*, international health experts call for urgent action from international development banks and pharmaceutical companies to stem the epidemic of blood pressure-related diseases affecting developing countries worldwide.

New findings reveal that each year 8 million people die from heart disease and stroke, the two leading blood pressure-related diseases. The majority of these deaths occur in the developing world where victims are often workers, whose deaths directly result in poverty for families and other dependents. According to the authors these deaths are largely avoidable, but no substantive effort to address this issue has been made by the international development banks or the major drug companies.

Author and Principal Director of The George Institute for International Health in Sydney, Professor Stephen MacMahon said today, "Ten years ago, The Global Burden of Disease Project predicted this epidemic, yet none of the key players who determine priorities for international health investment have made any real effort to address the problem. As a consequence in the last decade, blood pressure related diseases have killed more than 50 million people, disabled many more and taken billions of dollars from the already fragile economies of the developing world."

Around \$US50 billion is spent each year on blood pressure lowering drugs, more than 90% of which is spent in high income countries. "Low- and middle-income regions suffer five times the burden of disease, but have access to less than 10% of the global treatment resource. These diseases affect people of working age in developing countries, and consequently they have major adverse consequences for economic development as well as well as health," said Professor MacMahon.

Stroke is already the most common cause of death and disability in Asia and is rapidly increasing in other developing regions including Africa. At risk people in these countries could reduce their odds of suffering a stroke by more than one third by taking blood pressure lowering treatments, which are now available for as little as US\$ 1 per year. "The cost of avoiding a very large number of fatal or disabling strokes is remarkably small, yet in Africa, for example, there is not one single population-wide initiative aimed at delivering such treatment even to those at the very highest risk. For many people in this situation, the first relevant medical attention is admission to hospital after a stroke, if they survive it," said Professor MacMahon.

Most low- and middle-income countries lack primary health care services that can provide the long-term care needed for the control of these diseases. The authors admit that tackling this issue is difficult and will require novel approaches that are economically sustainable. This requires investment in health care delivery research, which is often the Cinderella of medical science. "Most international health development agencies and pharmaceutical companies believe the world's leading health problems are likely to be resolved by the development of clever new drugs. However these will have little relevance if there is no system in place to deliver them," said Professor MacMahon.

"We are calling on the major players to rethink their policies and strategies. The evidence is clear, and they have the power to bring about major change. They can't ignore it for any longer," added Professor MacMahon.

Source: Research Australia

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