



Frontline Health Workers

Fighting Non-Communicable Diseases

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are the leading cause of death in many low-and middle-income countries, and are projected to be the leading cause of death globally by 2030.¹ Of the 56 million deaths globally in 2015, NCDs accounted for 70%, or 40 million, with cardiovascular disease, cancers, respiratory disease, and diabetes accounting for the largest number of these deaths.²

The growing burden of NCDs threatens many health systems that are already strained. In many countries, health systems – and health workers – are not prepared to address the complex nature of NCDs, as most NCDs are multifactorial in origin and detected later in their evolution. Often health systems are fragmented and designed to respond to single episodes of care or long-term prevention and control of infectious diseases, and thus face significant challenges to provide early detection as well as affordable, effective, and timely treatment, particularly in underserved communities.³

As reflected in the WHO's NCD Global Action Plan, reducing the human and economic toll of NCDs hinges on building stronger health systems and ensuring an adequate supply of health workers who are well-trained, highly skilled, continuously supported, and appropriately deployed to address NCDs.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the minimum density of doctors, nurses, and midwives necessary to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 3.4 to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by one-third,⁴ is 4.45 per 1000 people. However, current trends suggest the world will be short at least 18 million health workers needed to achieve the SDGs by 2030, highlighting an urgent need for significant financial investments to scale up the number of health workers as well as policies that optimize the performance of existing health workers.⁵

How frontline health workers impact prevention, management, and control of NCDs:

With the appropriate training, supervision and support, frontline health workers can have a positive impact, carrying out a range of activities to help prevent, manage and control NCDs, that include:

- Raising awareness and promoting healthy behaviors
- Conducting screening of individuals and households at risk
- Monitoring symptoms
- Administering and managing medication
- Providing referrals to a health facility
- Responding to time critical events, and supporting follow-up after acute events
- Tracking health outcomes

Optimizing the role of frontline health workers for NCDs

In addition to ensuring the necessary number of skilled health workers, to optimize the role of frontline health workers (FHWs) for people with or at risk of NCDs, country strategies must prioritize efforts to address:

- Inequities in the distribution of health workers across countries
- Policy reform to expand the scopes of work to authorize FHWs to provide services related to NCD control and management
- Adequate support and supervision, as well as ensuring that FHWs are integrated into frontline teams and into the broader health system
- Financing to support salaries and benefits and incentive packages to motivate and retain health workers, particularly in remote, isolated areas
- Integration of NCD prevention, control, and management into the roles and responsibilities of FHWs who also provide services related to maternal and child health and infectious diseases.

The US Can Accelerate Progress

While the US Government does not currently designate specific funding to address NCDs, nor is there any program that specifically focuses on NCDs in low- and middle-income countries, NCDs are sometimes addressed as part of other USG global health activities, including maternal, newborn, and child health, HIV/AIDS, and nutrition efforts.⁹ At the agency level, including the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the National Institutes for Health (NIH), the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), where NCD funding is identifiable, it remains relatively small. One example is the recent Global Hearts initiative, launched by the WHO and the CDC to support governments in the prevention and control of cardiovascular disease.

To address the growing threat presented by NCDs, the US Government should increase its support for frontline health workers trained on NCD prevention, control, and management, and implement a comprehensive action plan outlining US contributions to strengthening the global health workforce to provide access to essential primary health services. This strategy should include concrete targets and clear accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress, including in NCD-related health services. Doing so will help build the foundation for low- and middle-income countries to fight NCDs on the front lines.

Global Hearts: leveraging team care for cardiovascular disease¹⁰

The WHO and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have recently launched Global Hearts, a new initiative to support governments in the prevention and control of cardiovascular disease (CVD), comprising three technical packages - tobacco control, CVD management in primary health settings, and reduction in the consumption of salt. The CVD management technical package aims to systematically address barriers to care by using highly effective, scalable, sustainable, and proven interventions, similar to those that have been successfully used in scaling up tuberculosis treatment and antiretroviral therapy.

The program will support team care shared tasks by training health services providers, including frontline health workers, in using CVD risk management protocols to they can appropriately identify, treat, and refer high-risk patients and complex cases, collect clinical information, and maintain simple treatment registers. In addition to the training, the program will also provide supportive supervision and skill-building as incentives for sharing tasks and will support and sustain linkages to the community.

BY THE NUMBERS: Frontline Health Workers and Non-Communicable Diseases



70% of all deaths globally are caused by NCDs⁷

18M projected shortage of health workers by 2030 without immediate and strategic investments⁶

\$47 trillion projected future economic loss in the coming 15 years if the burden of NCDs continues to rise. The majority of these losses will impact low- and middle-income countries⁷

87% of the 17 million annual premature deaths from NCDs occur in low- and middle-income countries⁸

Citations

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5. World Health Organization. 2016. *Global strategy on human resources for health: Workforce 2030*.
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Photos by Tommy Trenchard, IntraHealth International.



The Frontline Health Workers Coalition is an alliance of United States-based organizations working together to urge greater and more strategic U.S. investment in frontline health workers in developing countries as a cost-effective way to save lives and foster a healthier, safer and more prosperous world.