

Introducing Heartfile: the new associate member of the World Heart Federation

Dr Sania Nishtar, President, Heartfile, Pakistan



Experience from the West in a developed-world setting has proved beyond doubt that investment in prevention can appreciably reduce cardiovascular mortality and morbidity. These findings can be extrapolated to developing-world settings in principle; however, there are issues common to many poor countries which require a different approach and implementation from those adopted in the West. Also, with the global epidemic of cardiovascular disease now well under way, there is a need to prioritize the implementation of preven-

tive programmes in developing countries; the lack of relevant programme examples from the developing world is becoming increasingly obvious.

In the light of the above, Heartfile in Pakistan (<http://www.heartfile.org>) is considered a strategically important project. Heartfile is a non-profit-making non-governmental organisation, with demonstration projects located in Pakistan. It is now replicating its successful strategies in other developing countries. Heartfile's stratified community-based projects are designed to

reach out to communities in poor countries with a low literacy rate. Public-information material developed for print, electronic and grass-roots campaigns has been adapted to a lay uneducated target audience and provides a template which other developing countries can adapt to suit their individual circumstances.

Heartfile's approach of working with poverty-alleviation programmes and social development initiatives in poor rural communities and its strategic public-sector and private-sector partnerships are examples of cost-effective and time-efficient ways of integrating heart health into ongoing development initiatives. This strategy, which has important implications for replication in developing countries and systems with ongoing social development initiatives and poverty reduction programmes with a similar design, has been adopted by members

of the Heartfile Replication Group, which includes the National Heart Foundation of Bangladesh, the Sri Lanka Heart Association, the Mrigendra Samjhana Medical Trust of Nepal and the Iranian Heart Foundation. These organisations are seeking to replicate successful Heartfile strategies in their respective domains; several such initiatives are currently at varying stages of implementation.

Heartfile also attempts to provide a link between developed-country and developing-country initiatives, with the overall aim of benefiting from established experience. One example of this is Heartfile's recent collaboration with a UK-based social marketing agency, which has enabled Heartfile to extend the scope of its information dissemination strategy using social marketing techniques.

At the professional level, Heartfile's local and regional initiatives focus on professional education. Health professionals can exert great influence on lifestyle decisions in poor countries, by virtue of their privileged position in disadvantaged communities. Their influence as local advocates extends their role beyond the purely clinical and reaches out to the population in general. This group is the target of specific training in CVD prevention. Of the various possible ways of engaging health professionals in the prevention approach, Heartfile seeks to draw professionals into the prevention loop by focusing on, and gearing training towards, opportunistic screening for high blood pressure.

The role of Heartfile in developing the Guidelines for the Prevention of Heart Disease in South Asia, adopted by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, is a step forward in this direction. This has involved major collaborative work with all the South Asian countries and the preparation of a regional consensus statement on CVD prevention. Heartfile is also engaged in cardiovascular epidemiological research in collaboration with UK-based universities and research institutes, looking at risk factors in the Pakistani population.

Several other dimensions integrate local and international dimensions; the Heartfile Newsletter has been instrumental in bringing an international perspective on cardiovascular disease to physicians in Pakistan through regular coverage of events listed in Heartbeat and the ProCOR website (<http://www.procor.org>). It is hoped that integration of the various approaches of the Heartfile methodology in other developing countries will play a crucial role in shaping the programme agenda for cardiovascular disease prevention in developing countries. ♥