

Pakistan recognises burden of non-communicable disease

Pakistan has announced a national plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCD), which did not feature in the country's health policy before now.

"The plan provides an integrated framework for action; this is a concerted approach to addressing the multidisciplinary range of issues within a prevention, control and health promotion framework across the broad range of NCDs", says Sania Nishtar of Heartfile, a non-governmental organisation which played a leading role in developing the plan and putting NCDs on health agenda.

The National Health Survey of 1990-94 indicated that a third of Pakistani adults older than 45 years have high blood pressure, and that 40% men and 12.5% women use tobacco in one form or another. The

prevalence of diabetes is also very high at around 10%. But, although NCDs are major cause of mortality and morbidity in Pakistan, the National Health Policy 2001 did not tackle these diseases.

According to Nishtar, the plan defines groups of NCDs so that they can be targeted through a set of "harmonising actions" and "integrating actions" within existing public-health systems using an evidence-based approach.

Besides cardiovascular diseases, chronic lung diseases, cancer, and diabetes, the plan also focuses on injuries. In 1999 alone, 1.4 million road-traffic accidents were reported in Pakistan. Of these, 7000 resulted in deaths.

Another key public-health problem addressed by the plan is mental illnesses. According to government

estimates, one million people in Pakistan have severe mental illness, and a further 10 million peoples have neurotic mental illnesses.

Health minister Nasir Khan said the plan was not just a plan on paper but his government had already approved a project for the implementation of its first phase. He vowed that his ministry would implement the plan "in letter and in spirit".

However, it remains unclear how the government will implement such an ambitious plan given its poor record in the past. Tobacco control, road safety, and cancer control will depend largely on the way in which government makes legislative changes and whether regional health services have the capability to implement them.

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