

CONFERENCE REPORT

Innovating healthcare delivery to address noncommunicable diseases in low-income settings: the example of hypertension

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Hypertension is a global health issue causing almost 10 million deaths annually, with a disproportionate number occurring in low- and middle-income countries. The condition can be managed effectively, but there is a need for innovation in healthcare delivery to alleviate its burden. This paper presents a number of innovative delivery models from a number of different countries, including Kenya, Ghana, Barbados and India. These models were presented at the London Dialogue event, which was cohosted by the Novartis Foundation and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Centre for Global Noncommunicable Diseases on 1 December 2015. It is argued that these models are applicable not only to hypertension, but provide valuable lessons to address other noncommunicable diseases.

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High blood pressure (BP) is the world's leading disease burden, responsible for almost 10 million deaths annually, which is equal to the number of deaths caused by all infectious diseases combined [1,2]. The majority of this mortality occurs in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC)s, where people are presenting with hypertension at a younger age [3] and experience worse outcomes than in high-income countries [4]. Moreover, the proportion of people with undiagnosed, untreated or uncontrolled hypertension is significantly higher in LMICs, mainly due to limited awareness and overburdened health systems [3].

Changing lifestyles (increased intake of processed food, alcohol and tobacco consumption, limited physical activity), rapid urbanization, aging populations and genetic factors all play a role in the increasing hypertension epidemic in LMICs [3,5–6]. There are other underlying factors that are not completely understood, including increasing prevalence of low birth weights or repeated episodes of certain infectious diseases [7,8].

KEYWORDS

- global health • healthcare
- healthcare telemedicine
- high blood pressure
- hypertension • low- and middle-income countries • management
- noncommunicable disease

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Addressing the needs of patients with chronic diseases is challenging for health systems already overwhelmed by infectious diseases and maternal-and-child health issues. There is an urgent need for innovation in healthcare delivery to tackle this dual burden. A recent study has shown it is possible to substantially improve hypertension control at a national level in only a few years [9]. Moreover, innovative care models for hypertension that successfully decrease the workload in health systems and improve patient outcomes could also create solutions for handling other noncommunicable diseases (NCD)s. This was the topic of the recent London Dialogue, cohosted by the Novartis Foundation and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Centre for Global NCDs on 1 December 2015.

Innovative delivery models for hypertension were presented from Kenya, Ghana, Barbados and India. The Sustainable model for Cardiovascular health by Adjusting Lifestyle and treatment with Economic perspective in settings of Urban Poverty (SCALE-UP) program in the urban slums of Nairobi, Kenya, demonstrated the importance of designing programs around patients' daily reality. An excellent set of interventions addressed gaps in the hypertension delivery chain (improving awareness, access to screening and quality treatment and promoting adherence). As part of the program, 50 community health workers were trained and equipped to conduct door-to-door hypertension screening, seven patient support groups were formed, six clinical officers and nurses were trained and a standardized clinical treatment guideline was developed. However, despite these interventions, the program demonstrated limited success; while three in four hypertensive patients were treated at least once, only one in three participants was retained in treatment for >6 months and BP control was achieved by just 6% of patients [10]. It highlighted that job-seeking takes priority over healthcare-seeking behavior in these settings. Alongside financial reasons, patients failed to adhere to treatment, mainly because of limited opportunities to attend health services during the day.

The Ghana Community Hypertension Improvement Project (ComHIP) has the patient at the center of intervention, using digital health to empower individuals in their own disease management, for example, through adherence support and lifestyle education. This model maximizes screening and care delivery outside

the health system, by shifting these tasks to local pharmacies and community nurses, all connected by digital health to facilitate coordinated patient care. The model is based on a successful model in HIV, demonstrating how learnings from infectious diseases can be applied to NCDs.

India also provides innovative models for hypertension including the use of front-line healthcare workers to initiate structured behavior change (reduction of salt, harmful intake of alcohol, fruit and vegetable intake). One further example used innovative software to aid evaluation, risk stratification, drug management and lifestyle interventions for hypertension patients, and was associated with reductions in BP [11]. In Barbados, an overall lack of standardization in hypertension management (including poor adherence to hypertension protocols) was identified as a barrier to achieving successful hypertension control. The introduction and positive impact of new hypertension treatment guidelines showed that greater standardization to improve care is essential. Key to the success of this initiative was early identification and involvement of stakeholder groups.

However, healthcare alone is not sufficient to fully address hypertension, because many of the underlying factors fall beyond the scope of health systems. Tackling socioeconomic determinants could have much more impact and demands less effort from individuals [3]. There is consequently a need for a comprehensive approach to tackling hypertension in LMICs, based on cross-sectoral collaboration to bring together expertise and resources from private and public sectors.

Focusing on nontraditional health aspects has proven successful in high-income settings. One approach is the 'age-friendly city' example of New York, where older persons are asked to identify necessary changes across domains, such as transportation, housing, social participation, employment and health to improve their lives. This information is then used to shape actions by government agencies and private sector organizations. These principles are valid for LMICs as demonstrated by the WHO, highlighting the success, scalability and affordability of other population-based measures [12].

The hypertension challenge in the majority world has unprecedented scope. As the World Heart Federation's Roadmap demonstrates, proven cost-effective lifestyle and medical interventions to prevent and manage

hypertension exist, though uptake is still unacceptably low and is reflected in important care gaps in LMICs [13]. Hypertension is one of the easiest NCDs to diagnose and treat, but there is a pressing need for new ideas and evidence to support the effectiveness of innovative models that are affordable, culturally acceptable and sustainable at scale. Future models must be designed around a thorough analysis of patients' reality. Optimizing the use of digital health to transform service delivery, reduce costs, broaden access and maximize outside screening and care opportunities could help alleviate the burden of NCDs on health systems. Innovative care models linked to changes in community conditions could address wider social determinants. However, this requires a holistic approach involving a variety of partners. If successful, treatment coverage of the condition is one of the candidate indicators to monitor universal health coverage and lessons from hypertension may prove applicable to innovative healthcare delivery models for other NCDs that are more difficult to diagnose and treat.

Authorship declaration

The opinions expressed in this article were developed following a Novartis Foundation event in London (UK) on 1 December 2015. All authors contributed equally to the article, and the work to develop the article was that of the contributing authors.

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