

The Global Health Crisis

Each year, more than 14 million people in underdeveloped and developing nations around the world die from infectious diseases. This works out to roughly 37,000 deaths per day from diseases like pneumonia, measles, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and malaria.¹ According to the Global Health Council, these handful of diseases, categorized as infectious disease, are the leading cause of death for adults and children alike in sub-Saharan Africa. Consider that for a moment, in a region of the world long plagued by war and violence, preventable diseases are the leading cause of death. Most of the diseases killing people in the world today are easily preventable and mostly treatable with access to information and health care.

Though diseases like HIV/AIDS have caught the attention of the global community as they spread through the developed world, little is done to bring life improving treatments and advances to poverty stricken areas most affected by the spread of this disease. Moreover, very little research is done at all to cure diseases such as malaria and TB that are almost non-existent in the western world. Poverty and disease go hand in hand and it is those most in need that are left without access to medical care and information on prevention.

In a speech to the Global Health Council, famed physician Paul Farmer put it this way, “One place for diseases to hide is among the poor, especially when the poor are socially and medically segregated from those whose deaths might be considered important.”

HIV/AIDS

The Epidemic

Since AIDS first emerged in the early 1980s, more than 25 million people around the world have died of AIDS-related diseases.² This epidemic has had far-reaching consequences beyond the number of lives it has claimed. It has knocked nations off the path to national development; it has widened the gulf between rich and poor nations and has pushed already stigmatized groups closer to the margins of society. In today’s ‘global community’, HIV has become the first truly international epidemic, easily crossing oceans and borders.

In 2007 alone, around 2.1 million men, women and children lost their lives to AIDS-related diseases. More than 33 million people around the world are now living with HIV, and most of these are likely to die over the next decade or so.³ The most recent UNAIDS/WHO (United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS and the World Health Organization) estimates show that, in 2007, 2.5 million people were newly infected with HIV, with 70 percent of those infections occurring in Africa. According to the United Nations, AIDS is the biggest threat to Africa’s

¹ Global Health Crisis: Oxfam America website. July 16, 2008
http://www.oxfamamerica.org/whatwedo/issues_we_work_on/trade/news_publications/trips/art5386.html

² “2007 UNAIDS Epidemic Update” Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS

³ Ibid.

development. The reason being the large number of people in key societal roles who are dying: teachers, healthcare workers, civil servants and young professionals. At the end of 2005, there were 10 countries in Africa where more than one tenth of the adult population aged 15-49 was infected with HIV.⁴

Though we often hear about Africa as the epicenter of the epidemic, AIDS is on the rise in underdeveloped and developing nations all over the world. The epidemic is spreading in Eastern Europe and Asia. Following new WHO surveys conducted in 2005-2006, India is now thought to have between 2 million and 3.1 million people living with HIV. Other large epidemics are present in China (700,000), Thailand (580,000) and Myanmar (360,000). The total number of people living with HIV in Asia is thought to be around 4.8 million.⁵

HIV/AIDS has had a toll on high-income nations as well. Though historically, HIV infections were concentrated among injection drug users and gay men, heterosexual intercourse now accounts for a growing number of cases. In the United States, more than a quarter of people diagnosed in 2006 were female; in the United Kingdom, heterosexual contact is the most frequent cause of newly diagnosed infections.⁶ Many high-income countries suffer from the belief that HIV is something that affects only marginalized populations. On a national level, this belief prevents policy-makers and budget-setters from seeing the epidemic before their eyes.

Prevention and Education

AIDS is finally being recognized as a global threat and prevention programs have been implemented in countries throughout the world, but much more needs to be done. HIV is an entirely avoidable virus and the more educated people are across the planet on the ways to prevent contraction, the fewer cases we will see in coming years.

Success through education has been achieved even in some nations hit hard by AIDS. Uganda was one of the first nations to experience the devastation of HIV/AIDS, but has managed to take control of the epidemic in a meaningful way with high-level political commitment to HIV prevention and care. They have implemented same-day results for HIV tests, social marketing of condoms, self-treatment kits for sexually transmitted infections, and aggressive sex education programs. With these programs, Uganda has succeeded in lowering its very high infection rates. Since 1993, HIV infection rates among pregnant women, a key indicator of the progress of the epidemic, have been more than halved in some areas and infection rates among men seeking treatment for sexually transmitted infections have dropped by over a third.⁷

⁴ 2007 UNAIDS/WHO Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic. Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and World Health Organization

⁵ 2005-2006 Report on AIDS in the Asian Continent. World Health Organization

⁶ World Health Organization

⁷ "Health a Key to Prosperity: Success Stories in Developing Nations." Uganda/AIDS, World Health Organization

AIDS is a preventable disease, but to avoid HIV infection people need empowerment to negotiate safe and responsible sexual relationships; gender inequalities must be confronted; and those who choose to have sex need access to condoms. There is a huge wealth of educational resources available around the world, and yet in many places people still lack the knowledge they need to protect themselves.

Treatment

Though there is still no cure, as AIDS has become an increasingly global problem, numerous treatments have been developed to prolong lives. Antiretroviral AIDS medication is now slowly being distributed to low-income, high prevalence countries, but it is taking a long time to actually reach the people who need it. Access to treatment must greatly improve if millions of deaths are to be avoided.

"That is why the fight against AIDS may be the great challenge of our age and our generation, only if we meet this challenge can we succeed in our efforts to build a humane, healthy and equitable world. Let us ensure we are equal to the task." – Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan

Malaria, Tuberculosis, Measles and Other Diseases

In the developed world, we have a tendency to disregard diseases such as malaria, measles and tuberculosis which are not prevalent in high-income societies, but worldwide, these diseases are still taking many lives. Malaria causes more than 300 million acute illnesses and at least one million deaths annually and TB causes another 1.75 million deaths. Measles, which has been largely eradicated in the United States due to vaccinations, takes the lives of more than half a million people per year.⁸

Despite medical advances that have produced hundreds of drugs that are safe and effective against bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites, infectious diseases are still a major cause of death, disability and social and economic upheaval for millions around the world. Not surprisingly, children are most susceptible and account for the majority of deaths from infectious disease. Roughly 11 million children under the age of five die each year from malnutrition and mostly preventable diseases worldwide.⁹

What is most astounding about these numbers is that the vast majority of these deaths could be prevented for less than \$15 per person. If you put plain old bed nets around and do it properly and spray them with insecticide, you can get rid of half the malaria deaths in Africa, and that's at least a million a year.¹⁰ It sounds simple, but mosquito nets really do save lives and cost only \$10 to purchase, ship and distribute.¹¹ A measles vaccine for children costs somewhere

⁸ World Health Organization

⁹ Shah, Anup "Health Issues" for Risk Group LLC as sited on Global Health Issues website. February 18, 2008

¹⁰ Spector, Michael "Poverty and Disease" *The New Yorker* May, 2005.

¹¹ Project Mosquito Net

between \$.60¹² and \$1.10,¹³ yet measles is still ranked among the top four childhood killers worldwide.

Access to vaccinations, mosquito nets and health care professionals to monitor disease spread could reduce the global disease death rate by more than half. Countries like China have been successful in implementing education and treatment monitoring programs for TB, reducing their infection rate considerably.¹⁴ Other nations such as those in Southern Africa have begun distributing certain vaccinations which have raised life expectancy in those nations and decreased child mortality rates.¹⁵ Improvements like those made in these nations need to be expanded throughout the world. The progress made at combating certain illnesses in some parts of the world proves that with increased spending and worldwide attention to these issues, many of the diseases plaguing our planet can be diminished if not eradicated altogether.

Malnutrition

Despite vast stores of surplus food that go unused, more than 850 million people go to bed hungry each night. Malnutrition is a problem of politics, economics and inequity, and it occurs in wealthy countries as well as poor ones. Poor nourishment increases the risk of dying from pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, measles, premature birth, and various infections. Malnutrition is an underlying factor in 53 percent of deaths of children under five.¹⁶

Malnutrition and the diseases resulting from it is not just a matter of hunger and lack of food, but a problem of not getting the proper nutrients. Iron and vitamin A deficiency are the most common forms of malnutrition among children worldwide. Vitamin A deficiency affects approximately 21 percent of the developing world's preschool-aged children and leads to the deaths of more than 800,000 women and children each year. Because it compromises the immune system, vitamin A deficiency is estimated to be responsible for nearly one-fourth of global child mortality from measles, diarrhea and malaria and for a fifth of all-cause maternal mortality.¹⁷

Programs have been implemented successfully in Nepal, offering nutrition education and supplements for those suffering from malnutrition. Encouraging dietary intake of Vitamin A and iron and encouraging mothers to breast feed can help communities understand the missing elements in their diets in order to sustain prolonged health.

Programs Making a Difference

Immunizations Relief

¹² World Health Organization

¹³ Center for Global Development

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ World Health Organization

¹⁶ "Rx for Survival: A Global Health Challenge" PBS website. July 17, 2008

¹⁷ Center for Global Development

Governments of wealthy nations and nonprofit organizations with deep pockets such as the Gates Foundation have already begun programs to fund vaccine development and purchases for poorer nations. In 2007, officials from a handful of wealthy nations launched the Advance Market Commitment program to support and finance vaccine development and distribution in underdeveloped and developing nations; the program will cost \$1.5 billion and could help prevent 5.4 million deaths by 2030 according to the World Bank. Under the program, the developed nations will promise to purchase vaccines in the future on behalf of poor countries that request them, provided that the vaccines meet the plan's standards. The pool of money provides incentive for drug makers to create vaccines tailored for use in developing nations as well as to increase production capacity to accommodate the need.

Programs such as this are a step in the right direction and will prevent millions of deaths, but much more needs to be done to bring vaccines to everyone in the world who needs them. Nonprofit organizations are working hard to raise support and funds for these initiatives and to continue to put the pressure on the governments of wealthy countries to do more.

Medical Missions and Mercy Ships

It is clear that disease and poverty are connected in more ways than one, but one of the greatest disadvantages the poor suffer is little or no access to health care of any kind. A majority of the people living in Africa and Southeast Asia have never seen a doctor.¹⁸ Organizations such as Doctors Without Borders were created to bring medical care to countries and people that need it the most.

Medical missions operate in a number of different ways, both short-term and long-term. They bring medical professionals to communities in need for a short-term period, setting up vaccination and treatment tents and allowing people to bring medical concerns to licensed physicians. They also hold classes and seminars to educate people on everything from proper nutrition to safe sex and disease prevention. In developing nations, some missions seek to bring permanent medical facilities and solutions to communities that they feel can sustain them. Many nations have medical professionals, but provide no where for them to practice. Medical missions assist these areas by building facilities and providing supplies and training so long-term care can be provided. There are many organizations that provide medical missions, both religious and secular, and these missions are making a difference for people in countless ways.

Medical problems cannot always be addressed with vaccines and non-invasive treatments. Many of the sick around the world require much more. Mercy ships are large sea vessels fully staffed with medical professionals and volunteers that bring hospitals to the poor. A hospital on water of sorts, these vessels are fully equipped with operating rooms and many of the functions of a modern hospital. Mercy ships provide the kind of care that would be unimaginable in many parts

¹⁸ UNICEF

of the world. By providing eye exams, cleft palate reconstruction, medical screening and amputations among other services, these ships save and improve the lives of everyone they serve. There are currently three large mercy ships operating in different parts of the world. Adding to this fleet is a priority of the world health community and a goal for many nonprofit organizations dedicated to eradicating preventable disease and providing care for all citizens of the world.

Project 7

Project 7 is committed to “changing the score” by creating consumer goods that change people’s lives. Fifty percent of profits from Project 7 products will be donated to charities supporting seven of the world’s seven critical needs including HIV/AIDS, immunization relief, and medical missions. For more information please visit: www.project7.com.