

National leaders must step in to eradicate TB

Until national leaders step up, tuberculosis (TB) remains the single most lethal infectious disease globally, killing some 1.6-million people annually, surpassing even HIV/Aids.



Dr Paula Fujiwara

"This, despite the world's heads of state coming together last year at the United Nations General Assembly and for the first time unanimously promising to end TB by 2030 based on the Sustainable Development Goals. According to the new WHO data for 2019, that well-meaning goal will remain a fantasy unless there is a dramatic shift in the way we do business. It is not rocket science - TB is a disease that is preventable, treatable and curable," says Dr Paula I Fujiwara, scientific director of the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease.

"One of the most concerning parts of the new report is the global failure to prevent adequate numbers of new infections. We have the medications to prevent TB and we know prevention remains one of the most effective ways to slow the global pandemic and bring the global target into reach, and yet indicators show new cases are failing to decline in significant numbers. If we are to have a realistic chance of eliminating TB then we need to begin preventing the disease wherever we are treating it. This is an emergency: it is both long overdue and timely that we will see some significant announcements on prevention trials at the upcoming 50th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Hyderabad in India in a few weeks' time."

India's case

India has the highest TB burden in the world with one in four of all global cases reported in that country. The Indian government has made the fight against TB a central priority and boldly pledged to end TB by 2025, five years before the globally agreed target.

"According to the WHO's report, the number of people with TB in India is falling and that is good news. This demonstrates that making serious gains against TB in a short time frame is possible even in the world's largest and most geographically diverse countries if political leaders prioritise the disease. But let's be honest - TB is not still not falling nearly fast enough in India, progress is still too slow to meet the targets – and if we don't end TB in India we can't hope to end TB globally," Fujiwara says.

"This is an even bigger challenge given that nearly every other TB high-burden country except Indonesia remains far behind the pace needed to meet the global elimination target by 2030."

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