

1 October 2013 – Pakistan took its first step towards preventing and control noncommunicable diseases in the country by launching a 3-day training of health care workers in the WHO STEPwise approach to noncommunicable disease risk factor surveillance in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh in Lahore here today.

Launching the activity, Dr Tanveer Ahmed, Director General Health Services Punjab, described it as a major landmark, as Pakistan is suffering from a dual burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases, and until now little attention has been paid to noncommunicable diseases. At the same time there is sufficient evidence to suggest that noncommunicable diseases accounts for around 55% of the overall deaths in the country.

He described this as a breakthrough that will provide sound evidence about the risk factors and prevalence of noncommunicable diseases in two major provinces of the country. He thanked the World Health Organization and Pakistan Medical Research Council for their support in the survey, which will provide evidence for the requisite investment in this sub-sector of health, which includes cardio-vascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, preventable blindness and deafness, mental health and substance abuse, injuries, disabilities and rehabilitation.

Ms Melanie Cowan of WHO headquarters is facilitating the training along with Dr Ghulam Nabi Kazi and Mr Shahzad Alam Khan of WHO Pakistan, and Dr Muhammad Arif Munir of PMRC, while Dr Haroon Jehangir Khan Focal Person for noncommunicable diseases represented the Punjab Department of Health in the deliberations to plan this paperless survey to be conducted with the use of personal digital assistants.

Speaking on the occasion, Dr Huma Qureshi Executive Director PMRC pointed out the huge burden of noncommunicable diseases and thanked the Director General Health and WHO for their support. She pointed out that prevention was perhaps the only viable option in an environment where the treatment options are both limited and expensive, keeping them out of the reach of the majority of the population. This makes it imperative upon all of us to not only take cognizance of the immense burden of noncommunicable diseases and also address their public health dimensions while adopting a holistic approach. It is partly in this context that the World Health Organization selected hypertension as the theme for the World Health Day this year.

This important activity comes a couple of days after the observance of the World Heart Day. WHO has been offering its technical expertise within the realm of the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases following the development of a National Action Plan almost 10 years ago. The efforts have been somewhat eschewed in the absence of national or provincial programmes. However, significant efforts have been made within the realm of a multi-pronged tobacco free initiative incorporating elements for protecting non-smokers, offering support for tobacco cessation, monitoring the situation through surveys, enforcing legislation, and advocacy efforts particularly for raising taxes on tobacco to keep it out of the reach of school children. Tobacco consumption in any form is a major risk factor for virtually all the noncommunicable diseases.

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