

icddr,b scientists with international collaborators win major research grant to study ways to manage hypertension

Dhaka, 7 January 2016. Scientists with icddr,b's non-communicable diseases programme and their international collaborators have received a large award from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Medical Research Council and Wellcome Trust to study ways to lower blood pressure in adults living in rural South Asia.

Hypertension, or high blood pressure, is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease that is often under-recognised in developing countries but is a rapidly growing cause of death. Lowering blood pressure is thought to be the single most important way to avert heart disease.

The study will test low-cost public health strategies by health workers and doctors to lower blood pressure among adults and reduce their risk of heart disease in three sites – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – key countries in South Asia where the burden of hypertension is growing rapidly. The trial, called COBRA-BPS (*Control of Blood Pressure and Risk Attenuation – Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka*) and led by principal investigator Professor Tazeen Jafar from the Duke-National University of Singapore Graduate Medical School, will study 2500 individuals in 30 rural communities in these three countries over a period of three years.

The strategies include providing education in patients' homes about lowering their blood pressure through diet and exercise, improving referrals to trained doctors using simple checklists, training doctors and nurses in management of hypertension including the use of low-cost medicines, and counters at health clinics to provide tailored assistance for patients with high blood pressure. The researchers will compare these strategies to those provided in regular healthcare to determine if they lower blood pressure among individuals with hypertension, and are cost-effective.

All three South Asian countries have recently prioritised action on tackling non-communicable diseases like heart disease, and the study will provide important information for policymakers on specifically how to address rising rates of hypertension among their populations.

Dr Aliya Naheed, Associate Scientist at icddr,b and head of its non-communicable diseases programme, is the leader of the Bangladesh component of the study, which will take place in Tangail district. She believes the study will: "Empower the government health workers for early detection and treatment of hypertension at the primary care facilities with little investment of government resources, and control hypertension among the rural population. However, hypertension control requires lifetime adherence to medications and thus community based health promotion strategy will be essential for averting the prohibitive cost of treatment."

She goes on to say: "The Government of Bangladesh has recently committed to a new 6-year action plan on non-communicable diseases and the evidence generated from our study will guide adoption of cost effective action plans."

Non-communicable diseases account for 63% of global deaths (37 million annually and rising), with 80% occurring in low- and middle-income countries. This growing epidemic is a particular problem in South Asia, where people tend to get heart disease at a younger age, causing a greater loss of productive years of life and serious economic consequences for the developing countries in the region. The World Health Organization says that the social and economic costs of non-communicable diseases make their prevention and control a major priority for the 21st century.

Professor John D Clemens, Executive Director of icddr,b and a co-investigator on the new project says: “The strategies being evaluated in the COBRA-BPS trial have the potential to offer sustainable and low cost solutions for effective blood pressure lowering that can be integrated in the public healthcare systems in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, and could save thousands of lives.”

The study is funded by the joint global health trials scheme, a partnership of DFID, the Medical Research Council and The Wellcome Trust, which aims to generate new knowledge about interventions to improve health in low and middle income countries that can be quickly implemented.

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Notes to editors

About icddr,b

icddr,b is an international public health research institution based in Bangladesh. Established in 1960, icddr,b has been at the forefront of discovering low cost solutions to key health challenges facing people living in poverty and provides robust evidence of their effectiveness at a large scale. Dedicated to saving lives through research and treatment, icddr,b addresses some of the most critical health concerns facing the world today.