

Bloomberg's Call to Action – Broadening the Agenda for Action

By Maureen Lewis, CEO

The rapid shift in disease prevalence from infectious to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) across emerging markets is nothing short of spectacular. Less than 20 years ago, diarrhea, malaria and upper respiratory infections were responsible for the bulk of disease burdens in non-OECD countries. This is no longer the case.

Impressive progress in controlling communicable diseases has translated into what a Council on Foreign Relations' Task Force has defined as an [emerging global health crisis](#) of NCDs. Diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular disease (CVD), among other ailments, are rapidly outpacing infectious diseases and presenting societies and governments with a new and challenging agenda in healthcare.

[Michael Bloomberg](#) has eloquently laid out the new global health agenda, mandated by the rise of NCDs, encompassing preventative measures like fighting obesity, supporting smoking cessation, building better roads to reduce trauma and promoting more active lifestyles.

Yet, while taming the explosion of NCDs demands a strong focus on prevention, there are limits to how much prevention can do. Some cancers can be avoided by abandoning smoking, for example, but many other forms have no known causes, limiting effectiveness of prevention measures.

There remains a robust agenda for treating and managing patients currently suffering from NCDs which requires a radically different approach to diagnosis and treatment. NCDs are often asymptomatic early on and, once contracted, are chronic conditions that must be managed for the remainder of a patient's life. These patients require counseling, medication and tracking by professional medical staff to avoid emergency departments (EDs), control their illnesses and extend their lives.

Given the high rates of these diseases already – diabetes represents the biggest health problem in [Mexico](#), while heart disease and cerebrovascular disease are leading causes of death in [India](#) and [China](#), respectively – country health systems will need to be restructured to meet the increasing demands of patients with these conditions.

Whereas successful infectious disease efforts entailed the establishment of “vertical” programs that attacked a single illness, NCD challenges require more complex strategies for prevention and treatment, partly because patients often suffer from multiple diseases

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that tend to be chronic – lessons OECD countries have only recently begun to learn.

Managing the existing chronic disease burden will require restructuring the healthcare delivery system. Historically, hospitals have addressed a severe episode of illness and then sent the patient home. Today, patients across emerging markets increasingly rely on EDs to managing their chronic conditions. Often, ED staff scramble to respond to a flare up of a chronic problem that has gone without long-term management, at the expense of attending to one-off emergency patients.

Treating multiple chronic illnesses effectively requires restructuring healthcare services, emphasizing continuity and integration of care. This, in turn, translates into less emergency care and lower costs.

Preventing illness in the first place and preventing medical crises for patients already afflicted by NCDs both require global attention. While most donors and foundations remain focused on infectious disease interventions, the new frontier is already upon us and demands not only preventive measures to change behavior for the next generation, as laid out in the Bloomberg agenda, but also immediate action to shift patient management strategies to control NCDs and forestall unnecessary medical crises.

The key in both cases is behavior change, beginning with the donors and foundations who are fighting yesterday's war. Addressing NCDs does not mean designing vertical, single disease programs – typical of infectious disease interventions. It does mean a reset of the broader health system to meet the emerging crisis, from providers – who guide patients and treat their current illnesses – to citizens who need the support and nudges from providers to encourage new behaviors that protect and preserve their health. This is especially true for those who already have a chronic condition.

Bloomberg's call to action has raised critical issues and laid out an important prevention agenda, but a broader agenda encompassing the vital role of disease management will be fundamental to extending lifespans and ensuring quality of life going forward. 

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