

Kenya: NCDs and HIV

fight for limited resources

The crowd of health issues jostling for a share of Kenya's inadequate health budget is expanding, with activists calling for an increase in resources for the management of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which account for more than 50 per cent of hospital deaths and admissions.

"We need to see more commitment in terms of resources; we have policies and guidelines for the management of non-communicable illnesses, but we need strategic focus on operational implementation," said Andrew Suleh, Medical superintendent of Mbagathi District Hospital in Nairobi.

According to the NGO, NCD Alliance, NCDs are responsible for more than half of all hospital admissions and deaths; 13 per cent of deaths are due to cardiovascular disease, while cancers account for 7 per cent and diabetes for 4 per cent of deaths, respectively.

The UN World Health Organization's 2011 World Health Statistics report, states that the Kenyan government spends just 5.8 per cent of its budget on health; this represents less than half of the 15 per cent pledged by African leaders under the Abuja Declaration of 2001. Worryingly for health activists, government spending on health appears to be shrinking rather than growing; in 2000, health spending was 9 per cent of total government expenditure and reliance on external sources for health funding rose from 8.8 per cent in 2000 to 26.8 per cent, according to WHO. "The health service is overwhelmed; at Kenyatta (National Hospital, the country's largest referral facility) we perform open-heart surgery twice a week - our waiting list is up to 2013," said James Munene, head of the Cardiac Unit. "We are dealing with a situation where the population has grown but we still have the same number of facilities and the same number of qualified personnel.

"Risk reduction efforts are not working - the messages about HIV prevention and TB and other communicable illnesses have been very clear and evident, but we don't see efforts to ensure proper nutrition, exercise - the things that could prevent many of these NCDs," he added. "Perhaps because we have so much starvation in parts of the country we are afraid to advise those who have food on how to eat right." Against a backdrop of two consecutive rejections by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and flat-lined funding from the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, HIV activists worry that any move to increase funding for NCDs could mean less for HIV. Just 440,000 out of 1.5 million HIV-positive Kenyans have access to treatment, and more than 100,000 new HIV infections occur annually. But boosting resources for NCDs would be beneficial to people with HIV, as studies show they are at higher risk for conditions such as cardiovascular disease..

According to a 2011 study of more than 12,000 HIV-positive men and women in western Kenya, there is a high prevalence of hypertension and obesity - both linked to cardiovascular disease - among HIV-positive patients in that part of the country. The prevalence of hypertension among men and women was 11.2 per cent and 7.4 per cent respectively, while 11 per cent of men and 22.6 per cent of women were overweight or obese. According to Mbagathi Hospital's Suleh, the demands for more health funding should not put the various health activists at odds with each other, but rather should unite them to ensure the government fulfils its obligations. *IRIN Feature*