The global rise of chronic diseases is creating a crisis of suffering.

This report explores the reasons why — and explains what must be done.

The World Health Report 1997
Conquering Suffering, Enriching Humanity

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The World Health Report 1997: Conquering Suffering, Enriching Humanity provides an expert assessment of the world health situation in all its complexity, giving particular attention to the problems posed – in developing and industrialized countries alike – by chronic diseases. Compiled by the World Health Organization, the report combines the latest global health statistics with profiles for each of the major chronic diseases, offering pertinent details about causes, risk factors, global and regional trends, and current and future prospects for prevention, treatment, cure, and rehabilitation.

The report opens with an overview of recent trends that have made chronic diseases the focus of particular concern in every part of the world. These include population ageing, which puts more people at risk of developing chronic conditions late in life, global population growth, and the rising prevalence of unhealthy lifestyles – characterized by inappropriate diet, inadequate physical exercise, and smoking. The report also explains why these trends call for an urgent review of several traditional attitudes towards health. Key issues raised include the need to combat chronic and infectious diseases simultaneously, rather than sequentially, as in the past; knowledge that many chronic diseases have infectious causes, which reinforces the need for simultaneous action; and the tremendous burden of suffering and disability caused by chronic diseases, which makes health expectancy more important than life expectancy.

This general discussion is followed by a profile of the state of world health at the end of 1996, including a concise analysis of global economic, political, social, and demographic trends relevant to health in general and chronic diseases in particular. Also included are the most up-to-date statistics on life expectancy, mortality by age group and sex, and causes of death and disease.

Against this background, the report turns to an in-depth analysis of all the chronic diseases that are major causes of death or avoidable ill-health and disability. These include each of the eight most common cancers, circulatory diseases, asthma, diabetes and other metabolic disorders, hereditary diseases, musculoskeletal diseases, and mental and neurological disorders. For each disease, the report gives a brief description of clinical features, estimates the global numbers affected, and identifies the main risk factors. Drawing on the latest scientific knowledge, the report also explains current and future methods of prevention, detection, diagnosis, and treatment – whether concerning genetic influences that are being probed in research laboratories or recommendations for a healthy diet.

Noting the relatively small number of risk factors shared by many of these diseases, the report points to major opportunities for prevention through the use of coordinated strategies and integrated packages of disease-specific interventions. Though the focus is on global problems and global solutions, these profiles also offer individuals the best available advice on protecting their own health, particularly in the absence of a cure for most chronic diseases.

To show the way forward, the report describes the wide range of ongoing WHO activities aimed at combating chronic diseases, infectious diseases, and a host of other factors that threaten world health. The final chapter, on charting the future, estimates future trends for selected diseases and identifies six priority areas where international action can help combat chronic diseases and thus reduce the enormous suffering and disability that they cause.
“Increased longevity without quality of life is an empty prize. Health expectancy is more important than life expectancy.”

**Population ageing**

- Life expectancy at birth was 48 years in 1955; 59 years in 1975; and 65 years in 1995.
- In 1960, most deaths were among people under 50. Today, most are among the over-50s.
- By 2025, more than 60% of all deaths will be among the over-65s, and more than 40% will be among over-75s.
- Today there are an estimated 380 million people aged 65 years or more, including around 220 million in developing countries. By 2020, the figures are projected to reach more than 690 million and 460 million respectively.

**A crisis of suffering**

- These dramatic increases in life expectancy, combined with profound changes in lifestyles, are leading to global epidemics of chronic diseases.
- Chronic diseases can no longer be considered as problems confined to the richer nations. These diseases are emerging at an alarming rate in poorer regions, as unwelcome additions to the infections which still flourish there.
- As life expectancy increases in developing countries, so too does the certainty that people will become more and more prone to diseases that are more common among older age groups.
- People in poorer countries are now acquiring many of the unhealthy lifestyles and behaviours of the industrialized world: sedentary occupations, inadequate physical activity, unsatisfactory diets, tobacco, alcohol, and drugs.
- Globally, chronic diseases are already responsible for almost half of the 52 million deaths that occur every year.
- In addition to the many millions dying prematurely from these diseases each year, hundreds of millions of people will face many years of chronic disability and suffering.

**The hazards of living longer**

- Of over 15 million deaths due to circulatory diseases, 7.2 million were caused by coronary heart disease, 4.6 million by stroke, 500,000 by rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease, and 3 million by other forms of heart disease.
- An estimated 691 million people have high blood pressure.
- About half of the more than 6 million deaths from cancer in 1996 were due to cancers of the lung, stomach, colon-rectum, liver, and breast.
- In 1996 there were an estimated 17.9 million persons with cancer surviving up to 5 years after diagnosis. Of these, 10.5 million were women, 5.3 million of whom had cancer of either the breast, cervix or colon-rectum.
- At least 15% of all cancers worldwide are a consequence of chronic infectious disease, the most important of which are hepatitis B and C viruses (liver cancer); the human papilloma virus (cervical cancer) and the *Helicobacter pylori* bacterium (stomach cancer).
- The number of new cases of cancer is expected to at least double in developing countries during the next 25 years.
- Tobacco is calculated to cause 3 million deaths a year mainly from lung cancer.
and circulatory diseases. For cancer, smoking accounts for one in seven deaths worldwide.

- The number of people suffering from diabetes worldwide is projected to more than double from about 135 million now to 300 million by 2025. The rise in cases will approach 200% in developing countries and be in the order of 45% in developed countries.
- More than 40 million people suffer from different types of epilepsy; an estimated 29 million suffer from dementia; and an estimated 45 million are affected by schizophrenia.
- Rheumatoid arthritis is estimated to affect 165 million people.
- There are about 160 million cases a year of occupational diseases, of which 30–40% may lead to chronic disease and 10% to permanent work disability.

A global challenge

- Unlike many infectious diseases, the majority of chronic diseases are preventable but cannot as yet be cured. The emphasis must therefore be on preventing their onset, delaying their development in later life, and reducing the related suffering.
- Intertwined as they are with heredity and natural ageing, occurring stealthily over decades, chronic diseases pose far greater problems for medical science than do many infectious diseases.

- Global trends in chronic diseases indicate that shorter-term approaches, such as the development of new drugs, treatments, and vaccines, are urgently needed.
- Future action must also go beyond the mere repetition of familiar health education messages, such as don’t smoke, or consume a better diet. Such messages must be supported by actions that create supportive environments for health and thus enable people to adopt healthy lifestyles.
- While later death is in itself of benefit, the question of the quality of this extended life – and the burden of suffering and disability it so often brings – requires urgent attention.

“Inevitably, each human life reaches its end. Ensuring that it does so in the most dignified, caring and least painful way deserves as much priority as any other.”

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