BARBADOS – MEETING THE HEALTH NEEDS OF ITS ADOLESCENTS

Road traffic injuries, lower respiratory infections, and suicide are the biggest causes of death among adolescents. Globally more than 3000 adolescents die every day, totalling 1.2 million deaths a year.

Barbados, a small island in the Caribbean is defined as a high-income country, with an estimated population of 280,000 of which approximately 13.5% are adolescents – aged between 10 and 19 years.

Cultural influences, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity predisposes Barbadian adolescents to non-communicable diseases (NDCs), especially obesity and poor nutrition. Over 35% of girls aged between 13 – 15 are overweight or obese, with 36% of adolescent boys and girls in that same age group drinking at least 2 or 3 sugary soda drinks every day. Other NDCs such as asthma, allergic disorders and diabetes are not only common, but difficult to manage in adolescents.

Engaging in risky sexual practices in Barbados increasingly starts from an early age. Frequently unprotected, this leads to unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. In 2011 the adolescent birth rate was 21.3 per thousand girls aged 15-19 year; over 12% of births occurred in women aged 19. In a survey of Barbadian women aged 15-19, 30% reported having sex with men ten years older than them. Most recent school surveys showed that other risky behaviours, such as alcohol and drug use, begin at age 14 years.

Over the last years Barbados has made huge efforts to provide adolescent services through a number of policy and strategy developments. However, without a dedicated and well-coordinated plan that includes all sectors, the myriad of youth programmes, projects and diverse providers has created fragmentation and stretched resources. The country’s vital asset, its young, do not have a comprehensive health strategy that addresses their well-being and offers targeted interventions that will help them develop into healthy and productive adults.

In addition, nearly half of the unemployed in Barbados (11.3%) are adolescents, and the current suboptimal economic development in Barbados has seen an increase in violence and gang crime. The main causes of adolescent deaths are largely preventable and include homicide, suicide, and traffic fatalities.

When WHO launched the Global accelerated action for the health of adolescents (AA-HAI); Guidance to support country implementation in 2017, Barbados took immediate steps to become an “early adopter”. It was the first country in the Caribbean to apply this approach to develop a relevant national adolescent health strategy that would meet the needs of its youth.

The global AA-HAI guidance recommends actions by all sectors of society, including comprehensive sexuality education in schools; higher age limits for alcohol consumption; mandating car seat-belts and helmets through laws; reducing access to and misuse of firearms; reducing indoor air pollution through cleaner cooking fuels; and increasing access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

Barbados applied the AA-HAI guidance to its own specific context. “We recognised that the solutions to adolescence health cannot only be championed by health care alone and will involve several agencies, including youth and sport, education, welfare, law enforcement and of course, the invaluable contributions from the non-governmental organisations and civil society.” Acting Chief Medical Officer of Health (CMO), Dr. Kenneth George, 2017.

The Barbados Ministry of Health, supported by the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO) engaged the Ministries of General Education, Sport & Youth, Justice, Interior, and UN agencies WHO and UNFPA, along with civil society organizations in a multi-sectoral effort to determine exactly who needs to do what to improve the health and wellbeing of the islands’ adolescents.

With the guidance of the AA-HAI approach six priority areas were selected for the adolescent health strategy: positive development; violence, accidents and injury; sexual & reproductive health, including HIV; communicable diseases; non-communicable disease; and mental health, substance use and self-harm.

“We needed something that would respond to the changing demographics in Barbados, the economic down turns, globalization, environmental changes and the constant introduction of new communication technologies,” said Dr.Kenneth George.

The resulting 10-year strategy targets the most at-risk adolescents by proposing the following actions;

• the provision of strategic information and innovation;
• creating enabling environments and developing evidence-based policies;
• building integrated and comprehensive health systems and services;
• enhancing human resource capacity;
• identifying family, community, and school-based interventions;
• forming strategic alliances and collaboration with other sectors;
• expanding social communication and media involvement.

Positive development
Positive development means creating an environment in which adolescents can thrive, are encouraged to seek help, and know where to go for support. Barbados plans to develop adolescent targeted messages and materials for communication and advocacy; use the internet and media to reach adolescents, key community members, parents and guardians; and ultimately design and provide adolescent friendly health services that can be delivered through health-promoting schools as well as developing parenting or caregiver interventions that directly address adolescents’ needs.

Addressing violence and unintentional injuries
Addressing violence and unintentional injuries will require a top-down and grass-roots approach – engaging policy makers and key stakeholders to promote positive social norms, and empowering adolescents to cope with bullying and gang pressures. Barbados plans to enhance communication around violence, strengthen the capacity of the health and social protection systems to respond, develop programmes to mitigate age and gender-based violence, and collect data to better inform policy development. Interventions will include hotspot policing and demand for drug control, school-based bullying prevention, and the prevention of injuries.

Improving sexual and reproductive health in adolescents
Similarly, improving sexual and reproductive health in adolescents will be done by creating an enabling environment and strengthening legislation, policy development and implementation. Barbados plans to integrate and strengthen age appropriate comprehensive sexuality education programmes in schools and community-based settings, and implement a range of evidence based and effective interventions including the prevention of and response to harmful practices, such as transactional sex, intergenerational sex, and abuse.

Addressing communicable diseases
Communicable diseases such as hepatitis B, tetanus, rubella and vector borne diseases such as dengue and salmonella were identified as highest among adolescents. Ensuring access to routine vaccination, improving food safety, strengthening surveillance, health promotion, as well as actively engaging individuals and communities in prevention and detection of vector borne diseases are strategies that have been integrated into the plan.

Addressing non-communicable diseases
Comprehensive strategies to address non-communicable diseases (NCDs) will be mainstreamed into the health care, education and other systems which also reach out-of-school adolescents. Community based awareness campaigns will also be conducted on the importance of good nutrition, healthy foods and the consequences of malnutrition, anaemia and obesity on the overall development and growth of adolescents. The capacity of service providers to deliver effective nutrition counselling and services will be enhanced; breastfeeding practices strengthened, physical activity promoted, and dietary regulatory and fiscal policies developed and implemented. Health promoting school initiatives will be initiated to tackle tobacco, alcohol and drug use and abuse, and promote healthy foods.

Improving mental health
Finally, reducing the stigma associated with mental ill health is a key element of the plan to promote mental health in adolescents and develop the capacity of the health sector to address mental health issues through screening for anxiety, stress, depression and suicidal tendencies. In addition, developing skills among adolescents to deal with stress, manage conflict and develop healthy relationships will be undertaken. Interventions include counselling, psychosocial support and related services for adolescent mental health and well-being, parental skills training, as appropriate, for managing behavioural disorders in adolescents, and the prevention of substance abuse.

Overall the Barbados Adolescent Health Strategy (BADHS) aims to create a safe and supportive environment that offers protection and opportunities for healthy development, the provision of the much-needed health information and skills, enabling adolescents to better understand and interact with society. This entails making good quality accessible services to meet the needs of adolescents regardless of age, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, or socioeconomic status.

Barbados expects endorsement and launch of the implementation of its strategy in August 2019. As a first adopter of AA-HA! the island leads the way in the Caribbean to improving the lives of its adolescents, and enhancing the future of Barbados with a healthier happier community.

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Note: The AA-HA! Guidance was produced by WHO in collaboration with UNAIDS, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, World Bank, the Every Woman, Every Child initiative and The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health.

The AA-HA! guidance helps countries implement the Global strategy for women’s, children’s and adolescents’ health (2016–2030) by providing comprehensive information needed to decide what to do for adolescent health, and how to do it. The Global strategy, which was launched in 2015 to support the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), provides an opportunity to improve adolescent health and to respond more effectively to adolescents’ needs. In the words of the United Nations Secretary-General, “[adolescents are] central to everything we want to achieve, and to the overall success of the 2030 Agenda”.

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