NCDs—A major obstacle to socio-economic development

By Dr Martin Gillis, Canada

Oral disease, the most common NCD and one of the most expensive to treat, is a global public health concern.

The political declaration notes that oral diseases “share common risk factors and can benefit from common responses”. Therefore, interventions and strategies to improve health should have a positive impact on all NCDs, including the prevention and control of oral disease. The UN knows how to deal with NCDs; it is a matter of taking action by operationalising existing plans such as the WHO Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health, and utilising processes and structures such as the WHO Innovative Care Framework.

The WHO will be the lead agency implementing prevention and control measures for NCDs; however, progress will require a multifaceted approach from multiple sectors. In terms of nutrition, concerted action with other UN agencies and subsidiaries such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Codex Alimentarius Commission, and partnerships with external agencies, including global NGOs such as the FDI World Dental Federation and the International Diabetes Federation (IDF), is needed. Diet impacts processed foods with high fat, salt, and sugar content are common lifestyle choices in today’s society. Improving nutrition will require governments to mandate legislation and regulation reflective of health in all policies; a philosophical shift in the agrifood industry to provide affordable, healthy food; health-care providers to educate and facilitate behaviour change in the public they serve; and all of society to engage in healthy lifestyle practices.

Partnerships are crucial to the success of future endeavours against NCDs. Many NGOs and civil society organisations have already come together under the NCD Alliance and the World Health Professions Alliance to share expertise and coordinate efforts to facilitate change. The FDI and IDF recognise the importance of partnership as witnessed by the release of “A call to action for integrated case management of the diabetic patient” during the 2007 Annual World Dental Congress in Dubai. This led IDF to create oral health resources for diabetes care providers and raised awareness about the importance of oral health in diabetes management.

Today we have the task of implementing the Political Declaration on NCDs by addressing the public health challenge of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs, including oral diseases, are a major obstacle to socio-economic development and a barrier to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Post-2015 UN development agenda.

In September 2011, a UN High-level Meeting on Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) was held in New York City. This was a watershed moment in the global fight against NCDs with the adoption of the Political Declaration on NCDs by UN member states, meaning that all nations must now act against this global epidemic. The four principal NCDs, cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory diseases, accounted for 60% of all deaths globally and 80% of deaths in low- and middle-income countries in 2005. The WHO projects that deaths attributed to NCDs will rise globally by 17% by 2030.

There are four primary risk factors that fuel the rising incidence of NCDs: tobacco use, alcohol abuse, poor nutrition and physical inactivity. Disease prevention and control focused on minimising public exposure to such risk is vital to reversing the rising tide of NCDs. If this is not done, NCDs will continue to be a major obstacle to socio-economic development and a barrier to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the Post-2015 UN development agenda.

Dr Martin Gillis is an associate professor at the Dalhousie University’s Faculty of Dentistry in Halifax, Canada, and a member of IDF’s Consultative Section on Diabetes Education. He also serves as the oral health representative for IDF. Today, he will be presenting a paper entitled “Poor nutrition: A risk factor driving the NCD epidemic” as part of the scientific programme at this year’s congress in room S221 of the HCCCE.

Wednesday, 29 August 2012