WHPA Statement on Non-Communicable Diseases

The global epidemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is of major concern to the World Health Professions Alliance (WHPA), because it represents a significant threat to human health and development.

Unless addressed, the burden of these diseases will continue to increase. WHO projects that globally NCD deaths will increase by 17% over the next 10 years. This document sets out the facts about NCDs, and sets out the course of action that WHPA believes should be taken to tackle them.

Causes of the epidemic

NCDs – cardiovascular disease, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and oral diseases – account for 60% of global deaths, killing 35 million people a year. Eighty per cent of these deaths occur in low and middle income countries. Oral diseases, including dental caries, periodontal disease and oral cancer, are neglected but important NCDs with a significant burden on overall health.

The four main risk factors are:

- tobacco use
- unhealthy diet
- physical inactivity
- harmful use of alcohol

NCDs can be prevented or mitigated by:

- reducing tension and stress
- improving diet and reducing sodium intake
- regular sufficient physical activity
- avoiding obesity
- supporting optimal mental health
- emphasizing preventive care and screening for preventable illness
- avoiding tobacco and harmful alcohol consumption

There is an association between the presence of oral infections (especially periodontal disease) and systemic diseases, including cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases, adverse pregnancy outcomes, diabetes mellitus, pulmonary infections, and different forms of cancer.

A need for action

Health, social and economic policies need to be analysed and aligned at a national level to ensure the best possible health outcomes. A holistic health system built on a primary health care model and including prevention, rehabilitation and specialised health services is vital if the NCD epidemic is to be tackled. Reducing inequitable access to safe, quality and affordable medicines and health services is equally important as part of a comprehensive national NCD strategy.

Health professionals have an ethical and professional responsibility to act in the best interests of patients at all times. From a public health perspective, they also play a significant role in reducing the global NCD burden through appropriate actions in health promotion, disease prevention, treatment and rehabilitation, and advocating for research and finance. They have four main means of taking action:

- taking action within the health care system
- advocating for action in other sectors that determine the level of disease burden
- contributing to knowledge of best scientific evidence
- monitoring what works to change the course of the epidemic

The global crisis in human resources for health is a significant barrier to reducing the NCD burden in many countries. Collaborative practice among healthcare professionals and delivery of coordinated multi-disciplinary care can maximise resources. This makes prevention and treatment of NCDs cost-effective.

The World Health Professions Alliance WHPA is the world’s largest and most powerful body for health professionals. Through its five constituent professional bodies it represents more than 600 national member organisations, speaking for 26 million health professionals in more than 130 countries.

The members are: the International Council of Nurses; the International Pharmaceutical Federation; the World Confederation for Physical Therapy; the World Dental Federation; and the World Medical Association.