

Commission to tackle non-communicable diseases in Barbados

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By Tony Cumberbatch

Chronic non-communicable diseases (CNCDs) are major public health problems throughout the developed world and have now become even more serious concerns in many areas of the developing world. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that CNCDs account for 59 per cent of deaths globally and almost half, 49.5 per cent, of the global burden of disease. Already 77% of CNCD deaths occur in developing countries. High and rising rates of CNCD deaths have also been reported for Barbados and other countries in the Caribbean.

It is against this background that the Government of Barbados set up a National Task Force on CNCDs, 2002 – 2004, which produced a policy document for the prevention and control of CNCDs. Among the recommendations were:

- The establishment of a Health Promotion Unit.
- The establishment of the post of Senior Medical Officer of Health (CNCDs).
- The establishment of a National Commission on CNCDs.

The launching of the commission follows the International Consultation on a Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases for Barbados that was held at the Savannah Hotel in Barbados in April 2005. It was announced by the Minister of Health, Dr. Jerome Walcott on Friday January 26 2007 in the Ministry of Health's Board Room to a gathering of doctors, health professionals and members of the press.

The Minister also took the opportunity to say that the Cabinet of Barbados has designated this year, 2007, as the "National Year for the Promotion of Good Health and Wellness". The main purpose of this designation is to focus national attention on healthy lifestyle behaviours, and help individuals make small but impactful changes to their daily eating and physical activity routine in order to improve their overall health status

Dr. Walcott noted that the Commission draws on the expertise and disciplines of a broad-based section of society with specific emphasis on intersectoral collaboration. Members include businessmen, physicians and other health professionals, a trade unionist and educators. It is chaired by cardiologist Professor Trevor Hassell, and

deputy chairman is Professor Henry Fraser.

Professor Hassell was, until his recent retirement, the Director of Medical Services at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, having completed a distinguished career of almost 42 years with that institution. He was a founding member of the Heart Foundation of Barbados now the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados (HDFB), and led the Foundation as President over its first 10 years. He is the Foundation's Immediate Past President and currently serves as President of the InterAmerican Heart Foundation and Vice-President of the World Heart Federation.

Other members of the Commission are: Shephanie Bryan, Zonia Phillips, David Neilands, Orlando Scott, Harold Hoyte, Noel Brathwaite, Wendy Griffith-Watson, Barton Clarke, Adrian Randall, Elliott Douglin, Jackie King, Adisa Andwele and Wilfred Beckles.

"The distribution of disease over the last century has changed from infections and communicable disease to that of non-communicable disease" said the Minister. He pointed out that CNCDS, which include diabetes mellitus, hypertension, obesity, stroke, cardiovascular diseases and some cancers, now kill more people worldwide than malaria, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and several other infectious diseases combined.

Lack of physical activity, negative dietary influences, tobacco smoking, and life stresses all contribute to large numbers of the population being diagnosed with these disorders

The Barbados situation is not dissimilar to that for developed countries, where, for instance, 64 per cent of adult females and 54 per cent of adult males are overweight/obese, with the concomitant risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, cardiac disease and stroke.

The setting up of the Commission was particularly pleasing to the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados (HSFB), as, according to Adrian Randall, Chief Executive Officer of the HSFB, and himself a member of the CNCDS Commission, "the goals of the Commission are similar to the mission of the HSFB, that is 'to keep people heart healthy and reduce suffering and death from heart disease and stroke.'"

"I am delighted that the Heart & Stroke Foundation has been suitably recognised by the invitation to me as CEO to be a member of the National CNCDS Commission" said Mr. Randall. "The establishment of the commission to address the problems associated with chronic non-communicable disease (CNCDS) is one for which the Ministry of Health and the Minister in particular are to be highly praised."

Noting that the National CNCDS commission's mandate as set out by Dr. Jerome Walcott at its launch is 'To develop and promote well-planned strategies for the control of CNCDS, with specific emphasis on an intersectoral and multidisciplinary approach', Mr. Randall added said that the mandate relates very well to the general aims and objectives of the Heart & Stroke Foundation of Barbados and especially to those set out in this year's annual operating plans, which are:

- A significant decrease in the incidence of heart disease and stroke
- The provision of a heart disease and stroke information centre
- A significant contribution to reducing the adverse consequences of

heart disease and stroke

- The most effective advocate possible towards the realisation of our Mission

The most internationally recognized predisposing causes of CNCs are tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, stress and harmful psychological influences – at home, in society and in the workplace. The Commission on CNCs is expected to put in place efficient systems to estimate the disease burden, identify the determinants of health behaviours and develop health policies to address a population-based approach to disease prevention.

Some of these are:

- To conduct research to identify the root causes of the stresses that lead to unhealthy behaviours and harmful health choices. Stress is linked to the chronic diseases and the workplace has been identified as a major source of stress.
- National policies must aim at reduction of social inequalities that in turn lead to health inequalities.
- To formulate a food and nutrition policy that will address the region's major health problems. National and regional agricultural and food policies that place diet and nutrition at the centre of the public health equation are urgently needed.
- To develop and implement strategies for providing adequate funding for NCD risk reduction.
- To develop and adopt policies that will lead to the implementation of the "Healthy Schools" initiative. The school has been identified as one of the key institutions where healthy practices can be inculcated.

It is hoped that in addition to being a "pilot" project the Chronic Non-communicable Disease Commission would become a "demonstration" model for Caribbean and other developing countries undertaking similar projects.