

THE THREAT OF NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES (NCDs) IN THE FIGHT AGAINST HIV AND AIDS

Advanced HIV disease is a result of poorly managed HIV, whereby the immune system becomes severely compromised. Advanced HIV disease, if not managed, progresses to AIDS. Generally, as people age, they become prone to developing non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, hypertension, etc. With our PLHIV population aging, we are now faced with a complex burden of HIV/NCD comorbidity.

His Majesty King Mswati III in his speech from the throne during the official opening of the second session of the 12th parliament highlighted the threat posed by NCDs in the fight against HIV. His Majesty noted how the country has done well in stemming the tide of HIV and AIDS but pointed that as a country, we now face a growing threat in the growing number of NCDs.

The same concern was raised by His Excellency the Rt. Honourable Prime Minister Russell Mmiso Dlamini during last year's World AIDS Day commemoration, where he stated that the fight against HIV and AIDS in the Kingdom of Eswatini, is now faced with a new challenge, the rise of non-communicable diseases in the general populations, and among people living with HIV in particular.

The Prime Minister said the rise of non-communicable diseases in countries with high HIV prevalence, such as Eswatini, presents a critical public health challenge that requires urgent attention. "Historically, the primary focus in Eswatini has been on the battle against infectious diseases, especially HIV and AIDS. While significant progress has been made in managing HIV through widespread antiretroviral therapy (ART), this has inadvertently brought to light a new health concern: the emergence of NCDs", the premier had said during the 2024 World AIDS Day commemoration at Mahlangatsha Inkhundla.

The threat posed by the rise in NCDs in the fight against HIV and AIDS is a trend that has captured the attention of healthcare professionals, leaders and policymakers worldwide, as evident by its mention by the Monarch and

PM in their respective speeches, signalling a shift in the landscape of HIV management. At the height of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, the life expectancy in Eswatini dropped from 62 in 1985 to around 44 years in 2005. The introduction of antiretroviral treatments enhanced the lifespan expectancy of those living with HIV to 64 years once again.

As antiretroviral treatments enhance the lifespan of those living with HIV, the population is increasingly faced with age-related health issues, such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and cancers. This shift is compounded by lifestyle changes, urbanization, and the adoption of other diets, leading to a surge in conditions like obesity and hypertension.

The overlap of HIV and NCDs presents unique challenges. For individuals living with HIV, the presence of NCDs can complicate treatment regimens and exacerbate health outcomes. The interaction between ART and NCD medications requires careful management to prevent adverse drug reactions and ensure effective treatment.

Additionally, HIV itself has been linked to increased inflammation and changes in body metabolism, contributing to the development of these diseases. The disease process of HIV can result in the development of NCDs because there is a lot that is happening in one's body system that can result to NCDs if you are infected with HIV. For those on ART, this is an especially potent combination, as some antiretroviral drugs are believed to exacerbate metabolic issues. These health risks associated with aging are not unique to people living with HIV, but the virus and its treatment can exacerbate them, making integrated care all the more critical.

MITIGATING THE THREAT

What intensifies the issue is the fact that many healthcare systems, especially in lower and middle-income countries, are not fully equipped to manage this dual disease burden. Lack of resources, combined with competing health priorities, often leaves people living with HIV vulnerable to untreated NCDs. In response, global health organizations are calling for a revised approach—

one that encompasses comprehensive care strategies to tackle both HIV and NCDs simultaneously.

The rise of NCDs in people living with HIV acts as a strong call for coming up with new ways and resilience in public health strategies. It challenges everyone to think beyond the confines of traditional healthcare delivery and embrace a more holistic approach that honours the complexity of human health. As we tackle this issue, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to ensure that those with HIV continue to live long, healthy lives—free from both the shadow of stigma and the looming threat of chronic diseases.

Community-based interventions are gaining traction as potential solutions to this challenge of HIV and NCDs comorbidity. Health programs focusing on lifestyle changes such as improved nutrition, increased physical activity, and regular monitoring of blood pressure and glucose levels are proving beneficial. These initiatives encourage people living with HIV to take proactive steps in managing their overall health, complementing their ART regimens.

Moreover, stigma remains a significant barrier, despite progress in education and awareness, many individuals are reluctant to seek treatment for NCDs due to fear of discrimination. Efforts to break down these barriers are crucial, requiring advocacy and the cultivation of a more accepting and supportive societal framework.

One key strategy that the Ministry of Health in the country has introduced to try and mitigate this threat, involves integrating HIV and NCD care. The ministry is encouraging that the integration of services for people living with HIV when they come for their HIV services, they are also screened for NCDs. The ministry is also creating awareness to PLHIV as well as those who have NCDs about the comorbidity of the diseases.

In the overall the intersection of HIV and non-communicable diseases presents a growing challenge that creates a need for an integrated approach to healthcare delivery. By focusing on prevention, early detection, and comprehensive management, we can improve the quality of life for people living with HIV and mitigate the impact of NCDs.



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