



**Increasing Access to NCD Medicines in the Caribbean
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BACKGROUND

Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) – including cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes – are the leading cause of death in the Caribbean. Prevention of NCDs is important, however, investing in better NCD management is a key component of the NCD response. Management of NCDs includes the screening, detection and treatment of NCDs as well as palliative care. Such interventions are essential for achieving the global target of a 25% relative reduction in premature mortality from NCDs.

One of the noncommunicable disease (NCD) global voluntary targets is “an 80% availability of the affordable basic technologies and essential medicines, including generics, required to treat major NCDs in both public and private facilities”. However, in reviewing the results of the progress with the NCD targets, a significant gap is noted in achieving this target. Therefore, the Unit of Noncommunicable Diseases (NMH/ND) of the Department of Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health (NMH), and the Unit of Medicines and Health Technologies (HSS/MT) of the Department of Health Systems and Services (HSS) convened the national NCD program managers and those responsible for drug policy/procurement in the Caribbean, to discuss how best to improve access to NCD medicines in the region.

OVERVIEW

Health authorities from 16 Caribbean countries and representatives from PAHO's NCD program and Medicines program gathered for two days to discuss the barriers and solutions to improve quality, availability and equitable access to NCD medicines, including opioids, in the Caribbean, with a view to achieve the global and regional targets established for NCD management. PAHO representatives reviewed the global and regional NCD plans of action, along with the goals and targets and progress in achieving these commitments. The PAHO Strategic Fund was presented as an excellent opportunity for pooled procurement of essential medicines as well as technical cooperation in all aspects of drug management, including forecasting.

Each country presented their situation with regards to NCDs, their health service response for NCD management, the relevant drug policies, practices, and issues affecting access to NCD medicines, and information systems that are used for drug management as well as patient monitoring. The pharmaceutical procurement service of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) was presented, noting its 30 year history as a pooled procurement mechanism for essential medicines for the Eastern Caribbean countries/territories. In addition, the Barbados pilot project for a standardized hypertension treatment approach was presented as a model of care that could be used in other countries, to improve access to a core set of hypertension medication and improve hypertension control in a population.

At the end of the two days, participants gained a deeper understanding of the gaps and barriers in each country, and the commonalities that exist to ensure the necessary access to NCD medicines; as well as an increased understanding of how the PAHO Strategic Fund can be utilized to improve access to NCD medicines. Strategies to address the barriers were defined and a plan on how PAHO and Member States can work more intensely together to address the barriers was developed.

BARRIERS AND NEEDS IDENTIFIED

The common barriers and needs identified were related to the organization of health systems and services, regulatory issues, cost and financial barriers, logistical issues that affect availability of NCD medicines at the place and time when patients most need access, as well as limitations in health human resources in the area of NCD management as well as drug policy and pharmaceutical services. The needs are summarized as follows:

Organization of health systems and services

1. Political support and commitment for NCDs in general, and more specifically for sustainable financing and assured access to NCD medicines.
2. Universal access and coverage for NCD management.
3. Standardized treatment guidelines for the major NCDs.
4. Manage physician prescribing practices and demands for high cost drugs.

Availability issues

1. Priority setting – need for health technology assessments, especially for high cost medicines to help set priorities and make decisions on which drugs are included in the formularies.
2. Forecasting – need support and information systems to better plan, monitor and evaluate the NCD medicine situation and prevent stock outs.
3. Procurement – there are often supplier issues, and logistical barriers and difficult to access drugs, and assistance is needed with procurement.
4. Warehousing issues – at times there are needs for storage, space, etc.
5. Specific issues: access to insulin, morphine, monoclonal antibodies, and dialysis are particularly challenging.

Regulatory issues

1. Generic drugs – need a strategy that promotes the use of generic drugs, along the lifecycle of the product.
2. Quality of drugs-need mechanism to assure quality of manufacturers and their products.
3. Accessing PAHO Strategic Fund for NCD medicines – need to consolidate the demand for pooled procurement.

Costs and financial issues

1. Sustainable health financing to cover NCD medicines and eliminate out of pocket expenses.
2. Donor support for NCD management, including for high cost medicines.

Health human resources

1. Training is needed of health personnel on standardized treatment guidelines, as well as training in aspects of drug management.
2. There are insufficient health human resources, and staff are needed to manage the current and projected demands for caring for persons with NCDs , including patient monitoring, as well as establishing and maintaining the systems for drug management.

NEXT STEPS

PAHO and representatives from Member States agreed to work together to address these needs and barriers, and the following next steps were identified.

Promote standardized NCD guidelines

1. PAHO will disseminate guidelines for NCD management, so that the Ministries of Health can apply/adapt the guideline into national guidelines. This will include algorithms for hypertension and for diabetes, as well as guidelines for secondary prevention, arrhythmia, and stroke. PAHO will provide technical assistance on training to promote adherence to standard guidelines.

Prioritize hypertension/diabetes control

2. A Caribbean Hypertension and Diabetes Initiative will be created to scale up the experiences from the Barbados standardized hypertension treatment pilot project. PAHO/ND will provide technical cooperation in this are and it will include:

- a. creating and implementing a core set of medications, including addressing any regulatory aspects related to the core set of medicines.
- b. implementing simple protocols/algorithms .
- c. training providers.
- d. establishing an information system with a short list of standard indicators, to assess at baseline and at 12 month follow up, to assess patient status with regards to control of hypertension and diabetes, as well as coverage of the core set of medicines.
- e. assess cost of drugs/intervention, if feasible.

Improve the value chain for drug management

3. Build capacity for drug forecasting and planning to prevent stock outs. PAHO/MT will provide technical cooperation in this area and assist to create a regional network/system to address issues of stock outs.
4. Revive CARIPROSUM for supply chain management, including forecasting, beginning with a training workshops.
5. Explore possibility of using PROMESS as a warehouse for the NCD meds to be used to address issues of limited availability .
6. Use the Caribbean Pharmaceutical Policy to create more political support/commitment and inspire national policies and regulatory strengthening.
7. Use the Caribbean Drug Regulatory System, especially for priority medicines. In addition, PAHO will provide training on how to navigate web based information to obtain data on medicine registration with regulatory authorities.

Consolidate demand for certain NCD medicines

8. Consolidate demand for cancer drugs for pooled procurement from the PAHO Strategic Fund. PAHO will provide a list of available cancer drugs and insulin to solicit country demand and quantities, in order to consolidate and then determine procurement and distribution.

