

WHO target to cut early chronic illness deaths

25 May 2012

The World Health Organization announced on Friday it was set to approve a new target to reduce premature deaths from chronic illnesses such as heart disease by a quarter by 2025.

Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory conditions are known in medical terms as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and represent the world's biggest killers -- accounting for 63 percent of all deaths.

About a quarter of victims die prematurely, between the ages of 30 and 70.

Late Thursday, WHO member states meeting in Geneva made a "landmark" decision to fix the 25 percent reduction target which is expected to be formally adopted on Saturday, the UN health agency said.

It was agreed along with a raft of measures to address the prevention and control of NCDs, which have rocketed in developing countries in recent years.

About 80 percent of premature deaths from NCDs now occur in low and middle-income countries.

"The focus of attention of the world community on the largest killer is now on course," said Douglas Bettcher from the WHO's chronic diseases unit.

"The architecture to support developing countries in addressing NCDs and their risk factors is now in place."

NCDs also constitute a massive financial burden. A recent Harvard study found that left unattended they could result in lost productivity in low and middle income countries worth \$7 trillion up to 2025.

"This is something that would, in an era of globalisation and ongoing financial crisis, have

major effects for the entire world," said Bettcher.

In the resolution adopted by WHO member states but yet to be formally approved, countries also backed further work aimed at producing targets on NCD risk factors, namely tobacco use, alcohol abuse, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity.

They called for a formal meeting to be held before the end of October to conclude work on a "global monitoring framework" to prevent and control NCDs.

The World Heart Federation said the adoption of the target would be a "significant milestone" but much work remained to be done.

"Although we applaud the progress made at the World Health Assembly this week, the global target in isolation is not enough to tackle one of the most complex health challenges facing the world today," said chief executive Johanna Ralston.

"Further targets are needed to shape a framework for action against NCD risk factors, and we urge world leaders to agree on these targets promptly."

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