

Non-communicable diseases in South Sudan

There is no doubt that infectious diseases continue to be a huge threat in South Sudan. With many villagers taking refuge in IDP camps, preventing the spread of infection is a constant anxiety. Basic sanitation and clean water are a necessity and the different agencies that run the camps are united in focusing on prevention.

This is a huge contrast to the focus of medicine in the west where much effort is exerted to prevent and diagnose early the non infectious diseases of an ageing population. Free tests are offered to us to prevent high blood pressure, high cholesterol and to advise about levels of activity we need to aim for in our daily life. Much of the health budget in the UK is spent trying to prevent these diseases which may quietly creep up on us.

These diseases are of great importance in a low income country like South Sudan as well. For many years these non infectious diseases such as heart and kidney failure and epilepsy and depression have been the Cinderella diseases. Little attention has been paid to them and virtually no resources channeled into identifying them. Health workers gain little recognition for identifying high blood pressure and preventing inappropriate use of tobacco and alcohol. However, being on the front line and curing TB or preventing an outbreak of cholera are newsworthy.

The WHO recently reminded us that 70% of all deaths globally are non-infectious, and that amongst those over 30 years of age, 80% of premature deaths occur in low or middle income countries. Diseases of the heart account for most of these and the statistics for South Sudan are no exception. Tobacco use, physical inactivity, the harmful use of alcohol and unhealthy diets all contribute to this high risk.

The Sudan Medical link based in Salisbury and funded from many churches across the diocese, seeks to address this imbalance through training. Currently clinical officers and midwives are in training and part of their education will be learning how to encourage the impoverished and displaced people into a holistic and wholesome lifestyle. Offering health checks rather than simply responding to established illnesses will be key for the future of the country. Clinical officers after graduation will work in rural and IDP camp clinics supporting families and providing wise and informed advice in order to prevent this important group of non infectious diseases. John Rennie