

Tuberculosis: No More a Disease of the Past

by Sarah E Coghlan

TUBERCULOSIS, most of us consider it to be a disease of the past. At one time there was even a certain romance to it.

For me, there was a personal impact. The medical society in the dairy state in which I grew up, finally dictated the pasteurisation of milk.

Today, my father would be much in demand. So serious is the situation worldwide, that in April of last year, the World Health Organization (WHO) took the extraordinary step of declaring tuberculosis a global emergency.

It doesn't take an impinging outer world to account for the rising incidence of tuberculosis in the United States.

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For years, tuberculosis had been the nation's leading killer but with the benefit of the

antitubercular drugs introduced in the mid-fifties, the US had achieved the lowest tuberculosis rate in modern history.

An Urban Disease

Tuberculosis, in the United States is an urban disease. On the East Coast, New York City, Newark, Philadelphia and Atlanta report the highest incidence.

Densely Populated Areas

In addition to constantly increasing crowded living conditions, the current social milieu supports other spectacular sources for the spread of tuberculosis: jails, shelters, and migratory workers' housing.

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TB Emerges Anew on Centre Stage

IT may not be a surprise that three Nobel Prize winners were given the awards because of their work in connection with tuberculosis.

Earlier in 1901, the Nobel Prize for Physics was awarded to Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen who discovered the use of X-rays in 1895.

The first mass vaccination campaign was carried out in 1948-51 by the Scandinavian Red Cross Societies, with the support of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

For more than a century, physicians used to send TB patients for rest and exercise to sanatoria, often in mountain areas with plenty of fresh air.

Mycobacterium tuberculosis is the germ that carries TB infection, in droplets in the air, spread by coughing or sneezing, entering the body through airways.

TB kills more people worldwide than any other infectious diseases, including malaria and AIDS.

Untreated, TB kills about half of those affected. Preventable and curable (more than 95 per cent of patients are cured), TB nevertheless accounts for over a quarter of avoidable deaths among adults.

Unless immediate action is taken, it will claim more than 30 million lives during the coming decade,

Today, doctors use antiquated (but still effective) diagnostic tools. This is because TB research stopped before the age of biotechnology.

This is a disadvantage. The TB bacterium grows extremely slowly in culture and is so infectious that only certain laboratories are equipped to handle it.

But for a while the number of TB cases and deaths declined, rapidly in industrialised countries.

Public Policy Neglect

Public-policy neglect has allowed TB control programmes to disintegrate over the past twenty years. The public now reacts to this phenomena of the resurrection of a 'dead' disease with great surprise.

Poorly Managed Programmes

Programmes — poorly managed — have actually contributed to the emergence of dangerous drug resistant strains of the tuberculosis bacteria.

What Now?

The writer is a Health Planning Consultant at the Friends of Bangladesh.

Demographic Forces

AIDS, a Devastating Link

The largest increase in the current tuberculosis epidemic is, of course, the input of AIDS.

Doctors have recently found that some strains of enterococcus — a bacterium which causes wound and urinary tract infections — cannot be killed by any antibiotic.

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'Medical Disaster' Warning as Bacteria Fight Back

by Andrew Chetley

LEADING scientists are increasingly concerned that a medical disaster is looming because bacteria are becoming more resistant to the powerful antibiotics used to treat serious infections.

In a keynote address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in San Francisco recently, he said: 'Already some strains of bacteria have been found to carry resistance to every antibiotic known to medicine.'

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World-renowned microbiologist Professor Alexander Tomasz of New York's Rockefeller University is the latest expert to warn that within the next decade we could see curable diseases such as pneumonia, blood poisoning and tuberculosis returning as the killer diseases they used to be.

The inability to treat infections with the usual antibiotic of choice (or any other drug) can be disastrous. In recent years, resistant strains of bacteria have triggered severe outbreaks of gonorrhoea, dysentery, pneumonia, meningitis and deadly hospital infections in many countries.

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Fighting against Fate

WHEN life became difficult in her native village of Melanchi in the Nepal hills, Geeta moved to Kathmandu where she worked as a housemaid.

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Sexually Transmitted Diseases and AIDS

by Dr Mohd Ali Belal

MOST parts of the world face a catastrophic because of AIDS," says Dr Michael Merson, Director of the WHO Global Programme on AIDS.

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Thousands of women from Nepal end up in the brothels and streets of Bombay.