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Linda Baumann: Global health research good for us, world

Linda Baumann
February 20, 2008

The despondent faces of poor, sickly people in developing nations on our TV screens most nights can seem a world away from the majority of people of Wisconsin. But my work in some of the world's most impoverished regions confirms that many of the diseases exacting a toll in Madison are decimating countries like Vietnam and Uganda.

One of the chronic diseases I'm most familiar with is diabetes, a condition once considered rare in the developing world. The incidence of diabetes is increasing in almost every corner of the world due to the same risk factors that we see in Western countries: obesity, poor nutrition and physical inactivity. By the year 2025, diabetes is expected to affect some 40 million, with 75 percent of cases occurring in developing countries.

My work often takes me to Vietnam, a country with rapidly increasing rates of diabetes that are causing a tremendous strain on the health care system. The spike in diabetes there is not because its citizens are overweight, but because people now have access to foods that have helped them achieve normal weight (proving that some people do not have to be overweight to develop diabetes).

Like many other developing countries, Vietnam now has far too many cases of diabetes and far too few specialists to treat them. When I last traveled to Hanoi in November 2007 for World Diabetes Day, I visited a hospital where six doctors were treating 800 outpatients a day and inpatient endocrinology units in two regional hospitals housed an average of three patients per bed.

The people I care for with diabetes in Madison are not as different as some might think from the people I see in Vietnam and Uganda. Their incidence of diabetes is increased also due to lifestyle habits of overeating and lack of activity. They struggle with the same treatment demands to reverse these lifestyle habits by eating less and being more active.

Here in Madison, many are part of America's growing underserved and uninsured population, with limited access to health care, especially prevention-oriented care. In response to this gap, in 2001 I started the Harambee Health Hour, a community

program for encouraging exercise, good nutrition and education about diabetes prevention and self-care.

As Wisconsin's ambassador in Research!America's Paul G. Rogers Society for Global Health Research, I believe that the key to preventing and controlling diseases like diabetes is for the U.S. to make a greater investment in global health research. From the capitol steps of Wisconsin and Washington, we should call on legislators to invest in research to fight diseases that affect the world's poorest populations.

The demand for more research is not only a humanitarian issue, but it is a call to action to help protect our own national security. A healthy world contributes to greater political and economic stability, which in turn strengthens America's defenses. When we help other nations through health research programs and other humanitarian efforts, attitudes and perceptions about the U.S. improve outside our borders.

And by investing in research in countries like Vietnam, we can help stop diseases from reaching American soil. Health problems on one continent can and do become problems worldwide. A case of avian flu in Indonesia today could cause a statewide health crisis by next week. Wisconsin is at risk from diseases that can travel as easily as the next airline flight.

I am now spending two months in Uganda working with faculty and students to design programs for diabetes self-care. I will be conducting self-care and prevention research with implications for U.S. diabetes programs.

The goal of my research here and overseas is to help address health disparities and improve the lives of Madisonians, Vietnamese and Ugandans alike. I have learned much from working in countries like Vietnam and Uganda that my patients here benefit from.

People in Madison and nationwide can only continue to be the beneficiaries of research conducted in other countries through an increased investment in global health research.

It is the smart thing to do for America and the right thing to do for the world.

Linda Baumann is director of global health initiatives and a professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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