

The Silent Pandemic: Preventing Non-Communicable Diseases from Taking Over the Arabian Gulf

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Dear Editor,

The author is writing to shine light on a silent public health pandemic that affects over 40 million individuals residing in the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).¹ Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), an umbrella term for a cluster of chronic diseases that are linked to genetic predispositions and lifestyle behaviors,² account for 69-83% of all mortalities in the GCC.³ Collectively, these diseases impose an average financial burden equivalent to 3.3% of the gross domestic product in GCC countries, accumulating to 50 billion USD annually.⁴ Will contemporary healthcare systems be able to cope with their escalating burden? Are we prepared to face the silent pandemic?

The evolution from a physiological healthy state to a chronic disease usually develops gradually over several decades. Hence, even though the clinical signs of NCDs usually emerge in the later decades of life, there might be behavioral precursors that are nurtured in early childhood and adolescence. Indeed, there are a plethora of modifiable risk factors for NCDs recognized in the medical literature that act as pathogenic mediators, not limited to fruit and vegetable consumption, physical activity levels, and sleeping habits.⁵ If neglected during the latent phase, these behavioral risk factors contribute to NCD development, as well as the prevalent occurrence of co-morbidity, such as neurological diseases (e.g., Alzheimer's disease) and mental health disorders (e.g., anxiety), in affected individuals. Drastic measures are necessary to resolve the root causes of the silent pandemic, utilizing healthy lifestyle practices as a (preventive) medicine.

Moreover, although academic research has long been conducted in disciplinary silos, existing public health challenges in the GCC demand collaborative efforts between medical and allied health specialists and policymakers, in conjunction with other relevant stakeholders (e.g., teachers and coaches). The author advocates for novel community-based approaches to counter the NCD pandemic, with the Ministry of Health (MoH) serving as the central coordinating body to ensure quality control and to uphold ethical standards across organizations. Such actions could involve leveraging local gymnasiums and schools for NCD screening,⁶ alongside implementing culturally resonant health promotion initiatives at mosques to improve health literacy among GCC populations. These cross-sectoral collaborations can tackle the fundamental drivers of the NCD pandemic and nudge behavioral adaptations in GCC residence innovatively and pragmatically, without exacerbating the strain on their healthcare systems. Preventing NCDs from taking over the Arabian Gulf demands a collective, hands-on participation from all sectors of society. We need to act now.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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