

Healthier GDP through Healthier People

When we think of the economy, we normally consider such things as the performance of Gross Domestic Product, rates of employment, trends in the business environment and in the case of Trinidad and Tobago, the performance of the energy sector. Indeed, when economic, financial and other commentators write, debate, bemoan policies or generate forecasts, they normally restrict their discourse to these phenomena with not enough mention of the human condition. It is sometimes surprising that the most important resource any country, company or informal group can possess, the principal impetus behind profits, growth and transformation, can capture so little attention. Undeniably, human resource is the most important asset. Consequently, the capacity of a country's people is of utmost importance to its current and future economic fortunes. On this basis, it is imperative to monitor the health of every nation, to caution and to take decisive action to mitigate threats to the current and future labour force. This article seeks to highlight some of the perils of health facing the people of the Caribbean, and their implications.

The type of lifestyles increasingly being adopted in the region accounts for a significant proportion of the maladies now plaguing its people. Poor diets, aided by the proliferation of fast food restaurants and little exercise ensure that the Caribbean keeps up with the global trend of an increasing proportion of overweight people. The region has three countries in the top 20 of the World Health Organization's (WHO) list of countries with the greatest percentage of overweight people. The WHO considers individuals 15 years and over when ranking countries. Dominica is the highest ranked Caribbean nation on the list at 11th with 71 percent of its population overweight.

Barbados is next, rated 12th with 69.7 percent, followed by Trinidad and Tobago at 20th with 67.9 percent. The survey is based on Body Mass Index (BMI) calculations. This method has its shortcomings, but is still a good gauge of the ideal weight for most individuals. The WHO expects the proportion of overweight individuals worldwide to increase by a further 40 percent in 10 years. This trend by itself has proven to be a significant catalyst for chronic diseases. When alcohol and tobacco consumption are added to expanding waistlines the incidence of these lifestyle diseases is only exacerbated.

According to the World Health Organization, heart disease and stroke account for a third or 17 million of all deaths worldwide annually. In the Caribbean, the trend is similar and death rates in this category are projected to rise. In Trinidad and Tobago they accounted for more than a third of all deaths between 1998 and 2003 (CSO). Disturbingly, the young are increasingly being struck down by heart disease and strokes. Although cardiovascular diseases can be hereditary, a significant proportion of cases can be traced to poor lifestyle choices. For instance, smoking increases the risk of dying from heart disease and stroke, two to three fold. Physical inactivity and unhealthy diets are other main risk factors which increase an individual's chances of developing cardiovascular diseases. In addition to taking more lives than any other ailments, heart disease and stroke require expensive treatments which impose significant economic hardship on families and burden the health system and ultimately the economy.

Diabetes is another chronic disease experiencing dramatic explosion throughout the world. There were approximately 35 million people in the Americas living with the disease in 2000 (WHO). This figure is expected to more than double by 2030. According to the WHO, 80 percent of all diabetes-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries. This disease increases the chance of death by cardiovascular disease and stroke by 50 percent and causes significant damage to the body's internal organs. Many countries struggle to satisfy the organ transplant needs of their diabetics, who normally find themselves on long waiting lists. Amputations and other costly procedures and treatments are normally necessary to allow diabetics to survive. In fact, a diabetic's medical bills can be easily three times that of someone without the disease. In a study titled "The Cost of Diabetes to Latin America and the Caribbean" published by the WHO in 2000, it was estimated that just over 1.2 million people in the region (including the Spanish Caribbean) had the disease in 2000. Deaths related to the disease were just under 30 thousand, with 59 thousand people rendered disabled by it. Total direct and indirect costs (including lost man hours) to the region





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arising out of treatment and deaths for the year was over US\$3 billion. If we take factors such as the rise in the price of medicines and treatments, and lost productivity, and amalgamate them with projections for diabetes, the cost of the disease to the region in 2030 would be astronomical.

The Caribbean has an HIV prevalence rate that is second only to Sub-Saharan Africa. The number of people living with the disease in the region was estimated at 250 thousand by the 2006 UNAIDS AIDS Epidemic Update. With the exception of Cuba, the prevalence rate is high throughout the region, led by Haiti (3.8 percent), The Bahamas (3.3 percent) and Trinidad and Tobago (2.6 percent). Of the infected, 75 percent reside in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Approximately 27 thousand people were infected with the disease in 2006, while it claimed 19 thousand lives. A very disconcerting trend of HIV is that its greatest impact is felt on the most productive and economically active section of the population. In fact it has become one of the leading causes of death among adults of ages 15 to 44 years. In the region, the spread of the disease has been aided by several factors, chief among these being cavalier sexual habits, stigmatization, gender inequalities and the sex trade. Wider access to anti-retroviral treatment has the potential to extend the lives of many infected persons around the region. However, the disease continues to disrupt family life throughout the Caribbean and attacks economic progress on two fronts. It first erodes the labour force

by striking down productive members and future members. Additionally, it diverts valuable resources away from productive activity.

Even though we focused on a few diseases, there are several other lifestyle ailments that plague our region. For instance, cancer of all types is a leading cause of death in the Caribbean and worldwide. Hypertension is also a very common disease that affects thousands of people in many nations. Other ailments include mental disorders and chronic liver disease among a list of several.

All the diseases mentioned above are similar to the extent that they are all preventable, except for some versions of diseases like heart disease that are hereditary. Individuals can take specific steps and adopt lifestyles that can significantly reduce their vulnerability to these ailments. These steps (shown below) include, but are not limited to, proper diet, regular physical activity and responsible sexual practices. Individuals must recognize that they are principally responsible for their own health and must adopt preventative measures, not only for their sake, but for the sake of the wider society. However, there is also a critical role for the policy makers of the region which can be broken down into three components. The first area is related to government's expenditure, which is needed not only to provide treatment and medicines to the afflicted, but to fund the other two components (legislation and education). Government can use its legislative arm to support the reversal of the decline in national health. For instance, regional governments can espouse legislation such as one adopted by some states in the United States to place an outright ban on the use of Trans Fats to prepare food. Another example of this is the criminalization of the act of knowingly transmitting HIV. Such measures may involve establishing new organizations to monitor activities. The third component relates to promotion and education strategies designed to afford as much knowledge as possible to the public and to bring about change in undesirable behaviour. Some aspects of this are already in operation in Trinidad and Tobago as can be seen in the "What's your position" HIV awareness commercials and other commercials funded by the Ministry of Health vilifying alcohol and tobacco use, while endorsing regular exercise and balanced diets. What is obvious is that both the state and the people of the region must form a partnership in order to protect our vital human resource from avoidable peril. This will ultimately help to increase our productivity and GDP growth as a region as we strive to achieve developed nation status.

Remedies

Individual	Government
Proper diet & regular exercise	Provide treatment and medicines for the afflicted
Avoid alcohol & tobacco usage	Educate the public in order to alleviate the effects of the diseases
Responsible sexual practices	Promote healthy lifestyles
Preventative health care including medical check-ups	Adequately fund all these activities

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