



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

News release



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World Tuberculosis Day: Red Cross Red Crescent programmes play key role in global tuberculosis control

By providing increased access to tuberculosis treatment to vulnerable groups across the world, and ensuring higher treatment completion, Red Cross and Red Crescent community-based programmes play a key role in global tuberculosis control, says the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Two successful examples include the Russian Red Cross programme in Belgorod, where nearly 2,000 patients are currently being treated - since 2002, the defaulter rate has fallen from 28% to 4%. The second example is that of the Armenian Red Cross programme, where 86% of TB patients complete their treatment, compared to only 59% for those who are not under Red Cross care.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) tuberculosis (TB) remains a major cause of death worldwide – in 2005, 1.6 million people died of TB, including 195,000 HIV-positive patients. In its Global Tuberculosis Control Report for 2007, published on 22 March, WHO reports an estimated 8.8 million new tuberculosis cases in 2005, 7.4 million of which occurred in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. (*)

Community-based tuberculosis care has been shown to significantly improve both access to services and adherence to treatment, according to the WHO report, and although it is in place in many countries, it needs to be promoted actively and implemented more widely.

“We agree fully with this finding, and, since 2005, we have committed to scaling up our tuberculosis control programmes across the world,” says International Federation Secretary General Markku Niskala. “Through the work of their community-based volunteers and staff, our Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have a privileged access to particularly vulnerable people, including the homeless, the elderly, the very poor, alcoholics, drug-users, prisoners, and other marginalized groups. They are also auxiliaries to governments and as such, can work particularly closely with national health systems,” he adds.

Red Cross and Red Crescent nurses and volunteers help patients complete their treatment, provide them with food as well as social and psychological support, and also play a key role in fighting the stigma associated with tuberculosis. The completion of treatment is essential not only for patients to be cured, but also to prevent the development of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB), and extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB), forms of the disease which are much more difficult and expensive to treat, and with lower rates of cure.

Since 2005, the Kazakhstan Red Crescent and Romanian Red Cross have implemented successful two-year programmes to treat some 400 people with MDR-TB, with support from Eli Lilly and Company, the pharmaceutical company, in the framework of the Lilly MDR-TB Partnership. “We are very proud to help the Red Cross and Red Crescent support hundreds of patients with MDR-TB, in a programme that is particularly effective,” explains Patrizia Carlevaro, Head of the International Aid Unit at Lilly. “What makes this programme very special is the degree of community involvement. People who have been cured are recruited as Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers, and in turn, provide essential psychological support to those who are under treatment.”

“In many areas of the world, HIV and TB are a dual epidemic, and joint action is also essential to treat and care for people who are co-infected,” explains Bruce Eshaya-Chauvin, head of the Federation’s Health Department in Geneva. “People with HIV are much more likely to develop active TB because of a depressed immune system, and, once they do, they will die within weeks if they are not treated for TB immediately.”

To address this situation, many Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies are integrating their TB and HIV programmes, particularly in Asia (such as Myanmar) and Africa (such as Kenya, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe).

The International Federation is an active partner in the Global Stop TB Partnership, whose aim is to halve the prevalence and death rates of TB by 2015. In 2006, the Federation also established the Stop TB Partnership for Europe, which brings together the WHO and 30 leading agencies and NGOs, in order to bring about a more effective response to the TB epidemic in Europe.

(*) Tuberculosis is a very contagious disease, which spreads through the air. If not treated, every person with active TB infects, on average, 10 to 15 people each year.

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The Federation, the national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. For further information on Federation activities, please see our web site: www.ifrc.org