

South Asian Perspectives of a Global Epidemic of Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus

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The prevalence of type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) is increasing world wide. The South Asian region is estimated to have a greater increase in incidence of diabetes than other regions by the year 2020 (WHO). Urgent measures are needed to maintain glycaemic control and prevent onset of complications amongst the existing diabetic patients. Furthermore measures to prevent the onset of diabetes among the general population are the needs of the hour to decrease the burden of diabetes in South Asia.

Several studies have revealed that poor glycemic control is seen among the majority of T2DM patients in the region. Qualitative studies conducted on diabetic patients, health care providers and family members of T2DM patients revealed unique information applicable to the south Asian region.

These studies provided strong evidence that adhering to glycemic control behaviors, such as doing diet control, engaging in regular physical activities, and taking diabetes medication, are key to achieving glycemic control among adults with T2DM. Social and cultural influences, which include support of family members, play a large role in maintaining sustained glycemic control behaviors, adhering to regular exercise and medication taking behaviour. Further ethnographic data from Sri Lanka revealed insight to the health beliefs and practices of T2DM adults. The major themes identified are : (i) gaining religious support (ii) changing food habits is a struggle (iii) exercising is challenging (iv) western medicine causes long-term consequences and (v) Ayurveda/traditional treatments can cure. These findings revealed unique, informative insights into socio-cultural worlds of the T2DM patients in Sri Lanka. These aspects could well be applicable to the T2DM patients in region.

Further, the frequency of neuropathy amongst T2DM patients is high. The Michigan neuropathy Index and the monofilament test could be used to detect neuropathy early. Poor foot care practices contribute extensively to diabetic foot disease resulting in serious debility and amputation of feet. Despite regular instructions provided at diabetic clinics, only 37% of the study subjects maintained good foot care practices in Sri Lanka. It further emphasises the need to regularly screen diabetic patients for neuropathy in diabetic clinics. The Michigan neuropathy Index and the monofilament test scores are cheap, reliable easily used tests which could be conducted by trained nurses to early diagnose neuropathy even in busy diabetic clinics.

The onset of diabetes in the region could be prevented by adopting the following measures. These are to promote healthy stress free life style, adopt healthy eating habits, maintain a regular daily exercise regime and promote mental well being by close family and social relationships.

It is a great challenge to attain the above outcomes for our peoples. However if our collaboration could achieve this end, South Asia would become a model health region to the entire world.