

New Global Partnership, RHD Action, Calls on World Leaders to End Rheumatic Heart Disease

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Preventable Condition Causes 275,000 Deaths Annually, Primarily Among Women, Children and Adolescents in Developing Countries

New York - September 29, 2015 - RHD Action, a new global movement to end rheumatic heart disease (RHD), launched today on the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. Global health experts, healthcare providers, people living with RHD and others called for new action against this easily preventable but neglected disease, which is a major cause of serious illness and death among women, children and adolescents in developing countries.

Caused by untreated strep throat infections that progress to permanent heart damage, RHD affects more than 32 million people globally, 80 percent of whom live in the developing world. Children and young adults bear the brunt of the disease, accounting for many of the 275,000 people who die from RHD every year. Pregnant women are at particularly high risk of death. Because RHD robs young people of their most productive years, it also causes an enormous economic burden, costing low- and middle-income countries an estimated \$56 billion in lost productivity in 2013 alone. Greatly reducing the toll of RHD will be critical to achieving the newly established Sustainable Development Goals.

"Every death from RHD is a tragedy, because every one could have been prevented with penicillin, the oldest and still one of the cheapest antibiotics available," said Dr. Rosemary Wyber, Deputy Director of RhEACH, an RHD Action founding partner. "While the human and economic toll of the disease persists, RHD has lagged far behind many other illnesses when it comes to funding and attention. We call on world leaders gathered at the UN today to commit to eliminating RHD once and for all."

Treating strep throat with penicillin is highly effective in stopping the infection from progressing to RHD, and can cost as little as seven cents per at-risk child per year. But resources for RHD are minimal, accounting for only 0.1 percent of all research funding for neglected diseases. As a result, health systems are not equipped to prevent, treat or control this disease, health workers are often not trained to recognize and treat strep throat, and penicillin is often unavailable. Many people at risk are unaware of its causes and symptoms, so they do not seek medical attention for sore throats.

"Rheumatic heart disease is an injustice we know how to end" said former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who was diagnosed with RHD as a child and had subsequent heart valve surgery. "It's time for governments to put this silent emergency at the top of the global health agenda. I'm very pleased that RHD Action will lead the global movement to consign RHD to the history books."

RHD Action-led by the World Heart Federation, RhEACH and Medtronic Philanthropy-calls for urgent action in three areas where concentrated efforts could lead to rapid progress in reducing the toll of the disease:

- Governments must integrate RHD prevention and control into existing health services, particularly for maternal, child health and primary care.

- Non-governmental organizations working in health, development and poverty alleviation must provide RHD interventions through existing programs in developing countries.
- The private sector must develop innovative business models to address the shortage of RHD medicines, diagnostics and infrastructure.

Supported by a \$6 million grant from Medtronic Philanthropy, RHD Action provides scientific and technical resources for all countries tackling RHD, advocates for stronger policies and greater funding to eliminate RHD; works to empower and support people living with the disease; advises health officials on prevention and treatment strategies; and builds partnerships between Ministries of Health, research institutions, foundations, private industry and others.

In Uganda and Tanzania, RHD Action partners have begun implementing model programs to improve early detection and increase access to RHD care, in many cases by leveraging existing maternal care and HIV infrastructure. A third RHD Action country program will soon begin in India. RHD Action will share knowledge generated by these model programs to inform efforts to scale up RHD services in other developing countries.

For more information on RHD Action, visit www.RHDaction.org.

About Medtronic and Medtronic Philanthropy

Medtronic plc (www.medtronic.com), headquartered in Dublin, Ireland, is among the world's largest medical technology, services and solutions companies - alleviating pain, restoring health and extending life for millions of people around the world. Medtronic employs more than 85,000 people worldwide, serving physicians, hospitals and patients in more than 160 countries. The company is focused on collaborating with stakeholders around the world to take healthcare Further, Together. Medtronic Philanthropy focuses on expanding access to quality chronic disease care among underserved populations worldwide, in addition to supporting health initiatives in communities where Medtronic employees live and give.

About RhEACH

RhEACH (Rheumatic heart disease. Evidence. Advocacy. Communication. Hope.) is a technical support and policy translation initiative to amplify rheumatic heart disease control efforts locally, regionally and globally. RhEACH aims to identify, describe and disseminate solutions for this neglected disease and to reduce burden on vulnerable populations around the world.

About the World Heart Federation

The World Heart Federation is the only global advocacy and leadership organization bringing together the cardiovascular disease community to help people everywhere lead heart-healthy lives. We strive for a world where there are at least 25% fewer premature deaths from CVD by 2025.

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