

Solidarity with Haiti: the global diabetes response

Nancy Larco and René Charles

On 12 January 2010, a violent earthquake, measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale, rocked the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, and its surroundings. The exact number of victims remains unclear, but the Haitian Government has put the death toll at 230,000 people; 250,000 more were injured and more than 1.5 million reported homeless in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. The Haitian Foundation for Diabetes and Cardiovascular Diseases (FHADIMAC) launched a major campaign to help all people with diabetes and hypertension in the region. Nancy Larco and René Charles report from Port-au-Prince.

Launching an urgent relief effort on the day of the earthquake, FHADIMAC released a statement containing essential advice for people affected by chronic disease. This was broadcast on the capital's radio stations – a key source of information for the people of Port-au-Prince. The following day, FHADIMAC's centre in the capital received large numbers of people seeking help and advice. Although FHADIMAC's employees themselves were severely affected by the earthquake, most of them losing their home, personal belongings and/or suffering the loss of at least one family member, they all worked around the clock to keep open the lines of support for people with diabetes in Port-au-Prince.

The Foundation carried out free blood glucose and blood pressure tests, offered medical advice and distributed medications, including insulin, oral blood

glucose-lowering and blood pressure-reducing drugs. Several surgeons affiliated with FHADIMAC provided dressings for people with severe injuries.

In the immediate aftermath, the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) mobilized its Member Associations worldwide, issuing an appeal for assistance to bring relief to Haiti. Diabetes-related organizations from around the world, including Insulin for Life, the Children's Diabetes Foundation and the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, as well as a number of pharmaceutical companies, sent thousands of vials of insulin, oral blood glucose-lowering and blood pressure-reducing medications, glucose testing equipment and other supplies.

Without this international solidarity, all efforts to provide care in the capital would have been unsuccessful.

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People with diabetes, such as Marline G, looked to the Association for help. Marline, in tattered clothes and without shoes, had just been rescued from the rubble and was without her medication. Her blood glucose level was 12.8 mmol/l (230 mg/dl) and her blood pressure 170/100 – both much higher than normal. The FHADIMAC team was able to give her appropriate medication and treat her injuries.

With a dangerously high blood glucose level of 29.6 mmol/l (533 mg/dl), Joseph E came to the centre in a dire state. He received insulin free of charge. Similarly, Betty T, whose blood glucose had shot up to 28.6 mmol/l (516 mg/dl) because she was unable to access insulin for a week. She too was given free insulin.

People in Haiti, in particular those with a chronic health condition like diabetes or hypertension, face a series of massive challenges: a dire lack of adequate food and housing, and, despite reports to the contrary by some international humanitarian organizations, a lack of specialized health centres and essential drugs. Moreover, the earthquake has had an enormous psychological impact on everybody here in terms of post-traumatic stress and the prospect of a very uncertain future. The disaster

will leave deep, long-term humanitarian and economic scars throughout society. Many Haitians and Haitian institutions will never recover fully.

FHADIMAC drew up a plan of action immediately after the earthquake to meet, in the short, medium and long term, the needs of people with diabetes, and improve their care and quality of life. Indeed, this post-catastrophe period is being seen as an opportunity for FHADIMAC to rebuild an improved care structure using the resources that were made available in the aftermath of the upheaval in January.

Nevertheless, in the period since the earthquake, we have seen a dramatic deterioration in the clinical status of large numbers of people with diabetes and/or hypertension. In order to improve future responses to similar critical circumstances, it is important for us to study the impact of this disaster on people in Port-au-Prince with established diabetes and hypertension, and the appearance of new cases. Related risk factors such as stress will be an important factor. Programmes aimed at clinical and psychological evaluation of people with diabetes and hypertension, and increasing public awareness and detection, will facilitate improvements in the way we detect and manage chronic disease.

In these times of calamity and distress, hope has arisen from beneath the rubble.

FHADIMAC plans to broaden the scope of its activities. Building on the wave of international solidarity, our objective is to establish diabetes centres throughout the country to provide diabetes educa-



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tion and support the prevention and improved management of diabetes and its acute and chronic complications.

Many earthquake victims with diabetes are at acute risk of lower-limb amputation.

The services offered by FHADIMAC – health education, clinics, sale of medications at low cost, eye evaluation, foot clinics – were overwhelmed in the wake of the earthquake due to the lack of human resources and space. FHADIMAC has started training nurses to provide diabetes education for people with the condition; doctors are receiving training in the management of diabetes; and new personnel have been hired to run mobile clinics.

We would like to establish centres with facilities and equipment for retinal imaging to track and tackle diabetes eye complications, and dialysis treatment for people with renal failure. Foot clinics will need to be equipped to be able to diagnose peripheral vascular disease and treat diabetic foot ulcers – and ultimately prevent amputations. At the moment, earthquake victims with dirty and infected wounds in a lower limb who have not received adequate treatment due to a lack of monitoring by surgical and medical staff are at acute risk of amputation.

On World Health Day 2010 (7 April), FHADIMAC signed a partnership agreement with the Haiti Ministry of Public Health and Population to manage and implement prevention

and care programmes. This involves, among other things, the establishment of a national plan to fight diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

To learn more about the response to the emergency in Haiti, and to offer your support, visit www.fhadimac.org or go to www.idf.org, where you can make a donation online to the Diabetes Trust Funds for Haiti.

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