

Tuberculosis cases decline worldwide: WHO

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For the first time on record, fewer people worldwide are getting sick from tuberculosis, but cash is short in the fight against drug-resistant forms of the disease, the World Health Organization said Tuesday.

A total of 8.8 million people around the world fell ill with TB last year, down from a peak of nine million people in 2005, said the WHO's 2011 Global Tuberculosis Control Report.

Deaths from TB also fell globally to its lowest level in a decade, to 1.4 million in 2010, after peaking at 1.8 million in 2003.

However, efforts to combat multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) are underfunded, and the overall fight against TB is facing a \$1 billion shortfall in 2012, the report said.

"Fewer people are dying of tuberculosis, and fewer are falling ill. This is major progress. But it is no cause for complacency," said a statement by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

"Too many millions still develop TB each year, and too many die. I urge serious and sustained support for TB prevention and care, especially for the world's poorest and most vulnerable people."

The latest WHO report revised down its global TB figures from the past several years after consulting improved data on TB mortality and getting updates from 96 countries from 2009 to 2011.

Accordingly, the "absolute number of TB cases has been falling since 2006 (rather than rising slowly as indicated in previous global reports)," said the report.

Progress over the past decade has been notable in Kenya and Tanzania, where TB cases have dropped following a peak linked to the HIV epidemic.

Going back further, the report pointed to major improvement since 1990 in Brazil, which has seen "a significant and sustained decline."

In China, TB deaths fell from 216,000 in 1990 to 55,000 in 2010 and TB prevalence was halved, from 215 cases to 108 cases per 100,000 people.

"In many countries, strong leadership and domestic financing, with robust donor support, has started to make a real difference in the fight against TB," said WHO's Director-General Margaret Chan.

"The challenge now is to build on that commitment, to increase the global effort -- and to pay particular attention to the growing threat of multidrug-resistant TB."

The number of people treated for MDR-TB reached 46,000 in 2010, but that represented only 16 percent of the total estimated number of patients who needed treatment, the report said.

"Of the US \$1 billion gap reported by countries for 2012, US \$200 million is for the MDR-TB response," added the report.

Drug-resistant TB is caused by bacteria that do not respond to the standard six-month treatment with the most effective anti-TB drugs, isoniazid and rifampicin, the report said.

Instead, patients may be treated for up to two years with less potent drugs that cost more.

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