

Coronavirus crippling fight against other pandemic: TB

November 16 2020, by Patrick Galey



The fight against tuberculosis—a respiratory disease that is preventable and treatable, kills more than 1.4 million people every year—is chronically underfunded

The global community is missing the chance to end the "modern

tragedy" of tuberculosis, the biggest infectious killer, experts said Monday, warning how Earth's other pandemic will worsen during COVID-19.

The fight against [tuberculosis](#)—a respiratory disease that is preventable and treatable yet kills more than 1.4 million people every year—is chronically underfunded, with diagnosis and treatment failing to reach millions.

The Stop TB Partnership (STBP) said many high-incidence countries were still treating patients with outdated methods, and warned that the progress made in slowing TB's spread would be undermined by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"TB remains the top infectious disease killer, even though it is preventable and curable," said STBP executive director Lucica Ditiu.

"To make matters worse, most countries still use outdated policies, practices and treatment regimes."

The STBP's annual progress report looked at how the disease is handled in 37 countries where tuberculosis is prevalent.

It found that close to 40 percent of countries were still treating drug-resistant forms of the disease with outdated injectables, courses of which are painful, long and hold a virtual coin-flip of a chance of success.

Drug-resistant TB also remains chronically under-diagnosed, with only 5,500 out of roughly 30,000 new cases in children diagnosed each year.

"We need to be better," said Maxime Lunga, from the STPB in the Democratic Republic of Congo. "Every day more than 4,000 people die from TB. That is a modern tragedy."

COVID/TB dual threat

Doctors on Monday announced a new global study looking at the dual threat of COVID-19 among TB patients.

While there is likely a clear link between COVID-19 mortality and TB—given they are both severe lung infections—there has up to now been little comprehensive research on how the two diseases interact.

In a letter published in the International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases, doctors said they were looking at more than 600 COVID-19/TB patients across 36 countries with the aim of "better understanding how to prevent and manage this double curse".

"What we are seeing today, in terms of the numbers of people dying from TB and from COVID-19, or being co-infected, is the consequence of broken promises and broken [public health](#)," said Grania Brigden, Director of the Tuberculosis Department, The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease.

On the same day that Moderna announced its successful phase 3 vaccine trial results, Ditiu outlined the vast disparity in how TB research was organised and funded.

"There are 47 vaccines in human trial phases for COVID-19, all developed in less than a year," she said. "For TB, over several years we have just one vaccine in human trials."

She said that even if current funding levels were maintained, the TB vaccine wouldn't come online until 2027.

"TB is an undermined, so-called 'old [disease](#)' and this very unfortunate situation will not receive attention," said Tereza Kasaeva, director of the

World Health Organization's Global TB programme.

"It's no less important (than COVID-19). All these lives matter."

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