

## UN High-Level Meeting to end tuberculosis disappointing

A high-level meeting in which a political declaration to end tuberculosis was agreed upon fell short of expectations, experts say. Sophie Cousins reports.



Tuberculosis experts have labelled the first ever UN High-Level Meeting on the world's biggest infectious disease killer a "disappointment". On Sept 26, heads of state and political leaders gathered at the UN General Assembly in New York to adopt a political declaration, "United to End Tuberculosis: An Urgent Global Response to a Global Epidemic", which commits to accelerating action to tackle the disease by 2030.

There was widespread hope the meeting would represent a historic milestone in the fight against a disease that killed 1.6 million people last year. But fewer than 20 heads of state turned up for the meeting. Leaders from some high-burden tuberculosis countries, including India and Russia, and donors that had promised to help fund the response were missing.

"I thought this was going to be a historic moment, but I felt nothing historic", Lucica Ditiu, executive director of the STOP TB Partnership, said. Ditiu said it was "completely unacceptable that no head of state, no head of government, not even one" from the European region, which is battling an epidemic of multidrug-resistance, came to the meeting.

Sharonann Lynch, tuberculosis and HIV adviser for Médecins Sans Frontières' Access Campaign, said the turnout for the meeting was "pathetic". "Tuberculosis once again faces a lack of high-level engagement and attention. It is just a sorry reflection of a lack of political will", she said. "So much for smashing the status quo on tuberculosis. All we are left with is a bumper sticker slogan that everyone gets to repeat."

WHO's Global Tuberculosis Report 2018 was a sobering reminder that global efforts to control the epidemic are not on target to achieve the goal of ending the epidemic by 2030. In 2017, an estimated 10 million people were

newly infected with tuberculosis and 4 million remained undiagnosed and untreated. Almost half a million people had developed multidrug-resistant tuberculosis.

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The political declaration includes a commitment to diagnose and treat 40 million people by 2022, including 1.5 million people with drug-resistant tuberculosis, and to provide 30 million people with preventive treatment. They also agreed to increase overall global spending on tuberculosis to at least US\$13 billion a year by 2022. WHO estimates a \$3.5 billion funding shortfall for tuberculosis control this year; that gap could almost double over the next 5 years.

While Aaron Oxley, executive director of RESULTS UK, a charity focused on ending extreme poverty, welcomed the declaration, saying it was "meaningful" and "ambitious", he stressed accountability was critical. "It is ultimately true that, as it stands, it is just a piece of paper", he said. "Over the last year, the tuberculosis community has mobilised like never before and that does not stop [now]: it accelerates."

Ditiu said that, to keep countries accountable, the declaration needs to explicitly state what is expected from each country. "We need to hit ministers and say, 'this is what you endorsed, this is what it means for you'", she said. "We need a robust, independent, and transparent way of accountability."

Meanwhile, experts widely praised South Africa's leadership. Tuberculosis expert and director of the McGill International TB centre Madhu Pai

said that many hoped that their example would have inspired other nations. Earlier this year, South Africa disrupted negotiations, by calling for the declaration to include language around the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property (TRIPS), an agreement that allows countries to circumvent patent rights and enable competitors to make cheaper versions of essential medicines, particularly in public health emergencies.

The final declaration on tuberculosis lays out the case for use of the TRIPS agreement and clarifies that countries can utilise it for generic medicine production, but does not specifically call for countries to implement it.

This is particularly important in the wake of new research supporting the use of costly tuberculosis drugs. WHO recently released recommendations for the treatment of people with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis, prioritising the use of several oral drugs, including the newer drug bedaquiline. "For governments that are grappling with who to treat and how to treat drug-resistant patients, there are three barriers: complexities for patients; bad cure rates; and, with bedaquiline, a high cost", Lynch said.

A recent meta-analysis published in *The Lancet* paper on showed that bedaquiline and other later-generation fluoroquinolones had better cure rates and reduced mortality from multidrug-resistant tuberculosis.

Nevertheless, that tuberculosis is receiving renewed attention was celebrated by experts. "I am happy we have a declaration endorsed. Now my message to governments is: you have committed to the declaration and we will be after all of you to deliver on it. Let us all hold ourselves accountable", Ditiu said.

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For WHO's Global Tuberculosis Report 2018 see [http://www.who.int/tb/publications/global\\_report/en/](http://www.who.int/tb/publications/global_report/en/)

For the bedaquiline meta-analysis see [Articles Lancet 2018; 392: 821-34](#)