Breaking the Barriers

Former Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan appreciates KHPT’s community structures initiative

At a national level TB Mukt Bharat partners’ meet on June 24, Dr Harsh Vardhan, former Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, commended KHPT on its work with community structures. “To train 3395 leaders from the community is the correct approach...if we train even one community leader, we can reach many more with the messaging for behaviour change. I wish KHPT the very best,” he said, after a presentation of partners’ initiatives. State Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Shri Ashwini Kumar Choubey, also appreciated the work done by community structures.

The meeting highlighted the need for partners to work closely with the government, especially with the Panchayati Raj structures, through meetings, training and advocacy. KHPT, which is working with the Karnataka government to support COVID Task Forces at Gram Panchayat level, plans to leverage this engagement for TB elimination. This would include campaigns on TB Mukt Panchayats, adapting the community structure module into a task force training module and modifying the Patient Support Group module to suit the needs of Village Health Sanitation and Nutrition Committees (VHSNC) and Gram Sabhas.

Sharing project progress with the NTEP

The Breaking the Barriers (BTB) team had an hour-long annual progress meeting on May 6 with leadership from the National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP), during which updates on the development of behaviour change solutions, the mapping of vulnerable populations, major achievements in community engagement, the qualitative study undertaken by ICMR-National Institute for Research in Tuberculosis, and collaboration with the state NTEP were shared.

Dr. Nishant Kumar, Joint Director (Public Health), NTEP; Ms. Sophia Khumukcham National Consultant-Community Engagement; and Ms. Sumitha Chalil, National Consultant-Community Engagement, WHO NTEP Technical Support Network, attended the event. Dr. Nishant Kumar appreciated the team’s progress and committed to sharing KHPT’s Community Structures Engagement toolkit and Patient Support Group toolkit with all state NTEP officials, with a foreword from the NTEP. The NTEP team also expressed interest in the findings of the behaviour change solutions study.

NTEP launches KHPT’s Community Engagement toolkit

The NTEP on May 27 launched the Community Engagement Toolkit developed by KHPT under the USAID-funded Tuberculosis Health Action Learning Initiative (THALI) project with a foreword from Dr. Nishant Kumar, Joint Director, (Public Health), NTEP. In the foreword, the NTEP urged partners across the states to use the toolkit to guide their community engagement activities and institutionalize community engagement and patient support groups in state and district TB programs. The Overview (here), Community Structures (here) and Patient Support Groups (here) modules are available in Hindi and Kannada as well.

Leveraging Technology for TB Screening

MD NHM Karnataka launches initiative to use artificial intelligence for TB screening

KHPT, in collaboration with the Karnataka State TB Office (STO), Association of Public Health Technologists (APT), and Qure.ai Technologies Pvt. Ltd. will implement ‗Screening for TB Using Artificial Intelligence at Remote Radiology Facilities‘ (STAR), an initiative using Artificial Intelligence (AI) for TB screening using X-Rays in district hospitals. On June 8, Dr. Arundhati Chandrasekhar, Mission Director (MD), National Health Mission (NHM), Karnataka launched the STAR initiative at a virtual event. The event was also attended by Dr. Ramesh Chandra Reddy, Joint Director, TB, STO; Dr Balu PS, Professor & Head, Department of Community Medicine, JJM Medical College, Davangere; Dr. Shazia Anjum, NTEP-WHO Consultant; Dr Reuben Swamickan, Division Chief, Tuberculosis and Infectious Diseases, USAID India; Mr. Prashant Wairer, CEO, Qure.ai; Mr. Madhav Joshi, CEO, India Health Fund, and Mr. Mohan HL, CEO, KHPT.

STAR will cover the five districts of Koppal, Bellary, Bagalkot, Belagavi and Chikkaballapur in Karnataka, which including four districts under the BTB project.
KHPT hosts Facebook Live event with State TB Office and Department of Women Development and Child Welfare, Telangana

KHPT organized a Facebook Live event titled ‘Making Health Systems Gender Responsive’ on June 29, in collaboration with TB Alert India, the State TB Office, Telangana and the Department of Women Development and Child Welfare (WDCW), Government of Telangana. The event featured a conversation between Ms. Swetha Karanam, Child Development Project Officer, WDCW, and Dr. A. Rajesham, State TB Officer, Telangana. Dr. Rajesham spoke of the state NTEP’s efforts to work with the WDCW Department towards Active Case Finding. He highlighted the importance of the proper implementation of the Employer-Led Model, through which working women must be allowed by their employers to avail of treatment at their workplace, and receive regular payments. He also pointed out the critical role that women as trainers and educators can play in reaching out to a larger population, and how the state has created TB clubs with women TB champions, ASHAS and teachers who spread information on the TB disease during Gram Sabha meetings. Ms. Karanam spoke about how the state NTEP has been proactive in TB awareness, diagnosis, treatment and counselling at the various shelter homes run by the state government for women in distress, survivors of violence, and trafficking. Ms. Faraha Sheikh, a TB Champion, also spoke of her journey as a TB survivor at the event, encouraging others to get timely testing and treatment and not stigmatize TB patients. The recording can be accessed here and the report can be accessed here.

Following the workshop, KHPT ran an online campaign using voices of adolescent TB survivors and frontline workers, as well as infographics to create traction and sustain the focus on the June theme of TB and Women. The campaign reached 70,000 people, with a reach of 300 for the Facebook Live.

KHPT facilitates media interaction with Bengaluru Urban District TB Office

KHPT organized a virtual orientation led by Dr. Mahesh Kumar, District TB Officer, Bengaluru Urban, with nine leading regional media dailies on May 24. Dr. Kumar discussed TB as a disease, as well as the journey of treatment and care for TB patients. He also underscored the critical role that the media can play in not only reaching out to the general population with information on the disease, but also in mitigating stigma and discrimination associated with TB.

Care and Support Groups go virtual to provide uninterrupted support

In Ballari, Karnataka, Community Coordinator Sunitha J worried that the interruption to Care and Support Groups (CSG) due to the lockdown in the state would affect patients’ treatment adherence. On May 5, she organized a meeting over conference call in coordination with the district NTEP, in the presence of the Senior Treatment Supervisor, Mr. Gopal. Eight TB patients attended the first meeting, with Mr. Gopal and the BTB team members responding to critical questions raised by TB patients.

The lockdown in Warangal made it difficult for the Urban Primary Health Centres and the BTB team in Warangal to hold CSG meetings for TB patients. The BTB team decided to use WhatsApp; for each of the District Microscopy Centres, a WhatsApp group was formed, comprising of the TB Nodal supervisor, patients, TB Champions, NTEP staff and BTB team members. Twelve such groups were formed in Warangal Urban to facilitate CSG meetings. These virtual meetings were also attended by Senior Treatment Supervisors and Medical Officers.

The opening remarks were made by Dr Nishant Kumar, Joint Director (Public Health), NTEP; Ms. Amrita Goswami, Project Management Specialist, USAID, India, and Dr. Prarthana B S, Strategic Lead, TB Theme, KHPT. Panelists included, Dr. Oommen George, Team Lead, NTSU-TB IACSM, NTEP; Ms. Blessina Kumar, CEO, Global Coalition of TB Activists; Dr. Dalbir Singh, President, Global Coalition Against TB, and Ms. Mallika Biddappa-Tharakan, Results Delivery Officer and Lead, Knowledge Management, KHPT.

State Tuberculosis Officers (STOs) from the BTB states of Karnataka, Telangana, Assam and Bihar shared their state-specific experiences around the issue of gender and stigma. The STOs present at the workshop included, Dr. N. J. Das, STO, Assam; Dr. B.K. Mishra, STO, Bihar, and Dr. A. Rajesham, STO, Telangana. The Karnataka STO office were represented by Parashuram Patil, DRTB and HIV Coordinator, NTEP, Belagavi. The recording of the session can be accessed here.

KHPT highlighted the Jan Andolan theme of Gender and TB at a virtual workshop titled ‘Gender Responsiveness and Stigma Redressal Workshop on Tuberculosis’ on June 4 in collaboration with USAID and the NTEP. The workshop enabled a discussion on gender and stigma as barriers to accessing healthcare and completing TB treatment. The speakers at the workshop were expert resource persons with extensive experience in public health, women’s issues and rights, TB, and allied fields.

The BTB team organized two virtual trainings on May 15 and June 11 in Sangareddy with 25 student volunteers from Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs). BTB is working with industrial workers who, due to occupational conditions, are vulnerable to developing TB. These students were oriented on TB and the BTB project, the vulnerabilities of industrial workers, and the role that they can play in addressing the challenges around TB.

Community Engagement

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At a press briefing on June 28 in Bengaluru, Dr. K Sudhakar, Hon’ble Minister for Health and Medical Education, Karnataka, applauded KHPT’s STAR AI initiative. The project received a mention in several English and Kannada newspapers and news websites.

Community Engagement

KHPT conducts workshop to address gender and stigma barriers in alignment with TB Mukt Bharat and Jan Andolan themes

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Adapting field activities to the COVID-19 situation

JEET was able to identify 1362 presumptive TB patients and notify an additional 963 patients in the last two months inspite of the challenges posed due to lockdown, lack of access to private facilities and most facilities being converted to COVID hospitals. JEET staff facilitated the testing of 144 samples for TB. They followed up 2600 patients on treatment in the private sector telephonically and in person; of these 248 patients were followed up through video calls for counselling.

About 45 doctors were identified as being ready to do video consultation for TB patients and patients were linked up to them where needed.

Community Structures’ COVID-19 Initiatives

In Hyderabad, the Chaitanya Youth Association distributed face masks and dry ration to 20 orphaned children at Darushaifa Rainbow home. The Barkas Youth Welfare Society supported 10000 COVID patients by facilitating oxygen cylinders for them. At Langar Houz TB Unit, Vaibhav Mahila Sangham, distributed cooked food to 200 people, including the homeless and migrant workers. Around 211 Community Structure members facilitated vaccinations for 386 community members.

The Mallige Self-Help Group (SHG) and Annamma SHG in Bengaluru came together to cook food and distribute it among the vulnerable in their community. While Mallige SHG members distributed 75 food packets, Annamma SHG distributed food packets to 40 members. Community structure members of Prathibha Shree Shakti Sangha in Belthur, Bengaluru, mobilized Attica Gold Company to support 300 underprivileged families in their area with grocery kits worth Rs. 255,000.

A COVID vaccination camp was organized by the BTB team in collaboration with Laggere Primary Health Centre, Bengaluru, at which 15 visually impaired persons were vaccinated. In addition, through various community level activities, community structures reached out to around 2566 people in Bengaluru for COVID-19 screening, of which 546 (21%) cases were referred for testing, 369 (68% of the referred) got tested and 60 (16.3%) were found to be positive. Another 308 persons were referred for COVID-19 vaccination and 295 (96% of the referred) were vaccinated.

In Bagalkot, community structure members coordinated with BTB staff and a local non-profit organization, ‘Manjunath Samsthe’, to get a pass for the latter’s vehicle to transport TB patients to health facilities for testing and treatment.

In Belagavi, the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Yuvak Mandal and the One Nation Youth Club distributed 45 packets of dry ration to the homeless, as well as TB and HIV positive patients in the slums of Belagavi town.

In Ballari, the BTB team disseminated information on COVID-appropriate behaviour, treatment and vaccination with the community during TB awareness sessions and door to door visits. About 297 people were reached out through these efforts. The vaccination of 56 persons, including three TB patients and seven TB survivors was facilitated. In addition, the team supported three COVID surveys being conducted by ASHAs.

In Koppal, seven community structures covered 100 households through door to door visits and referred 41 cases for COVID-19 testing, facilitating vaccinations for another 42 persons.

Joint Effort for Elimination of Tuberculosis (JEET)

KHPT implements the JEET project, funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, implementing private sector engagement initiatives in three districts of Bengaluru.

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Private sector patients supported through ‘Ask Your Doubts’ virtual sessions

The lockdown situation in Karnataka restricted TB patients’ access to healthcare providers. JEET organized two sessions on Google Hangouts for patients entitled ‘Ask Your Doubts’ on June 5 and 19. The first meeting was coordinated by Dr. Anil from the STO office and on June 19 by Dr. Suma, a pulmonologist from Excel Care Hospital. They clarified questions on their treatment, COVID and vaccinations. A total of 101 patients benefited from these interactions.

The JEET team also supported two families with members who tested positive for COVID-19 with oxygen cylinders as well as arranging admissions at COVID hospitals and COVID Care Centres. Treatment Coordinators (TCs) of counselled 57 TB patients with COVID-19 enrolled in private hospitals across Bengaluru City, Bengaluru Urban and Bengaluru Rural districts. Hub Agents shared a COVID-TB bidirectional testing brochure (developed by JEET) to nearly 1500 facilities in the three districts.

The TB Careline registered 904 new patients in the May-June period. 572 patients were reported to have completed treatment successfully. 46 patients were reported to have died and 9 patients stopped treatment on the advice of their doctor. 2774 patients were currently on active care. 11077 calls were made by the team for follow up, registration of patients and for post-treatment follow up.

Careline counsellors facilitate conference calls with TB Champions for patients

The Careline counsellors, in the course of their regular duty, identified patients with more side effects and those who were on the verge of leaving treatment due to various reasons. They decided to organize conference calls over WhatsApp in groups of 5 for these vulnerable patients, featuring a counsellor and a TB Champion who had successfully completed TB treatment. After some initial handholding, they took a step back to allow the TB Champions to conduct the meeting, share their experiences with the TB patients, motivate patients and answer their questions.

26 conference calls were made by the team involving 49 patients on treatment, and 29 Champions who had completed treatment. 15 video calls were made by the team, involving 63 patients and 15 Champions. After discussing their fears with the TB Champions, the patients were motivated to complete treatment. The Careline counsellors are planning more calls with willing patients, and are planning to invite the PPM Coordinator to answer questions related to welfare schemes such as the Nikshay Poshan Yojana.

In the six months of the Koppal Careline’s operations:

- 833 ASHAs/ Mid-Level Health Providers have been followed up to identify presumptives. Due to COVID-19, calls to ASHAs were suspended in the May-June period.
- 170 private providers have been followed up. 1986 patients on treatment have been cumulatively followed up for counselling.

In the May-June period:

- 122 cumulative presumptive cases have been followed up and 111 cases referred for X-ray, CBNAAT testing and doctor referrals to identify persistent symptomatics. 12 cases have been identified after this process.
- 7062 COVID patients and persons tested for COVID-19 have been followed up to identify TB presumptives among them. 23 presumptives were identified and tested. 2 patients with comorbidities were identified for follow up.

For more information on the above activities, please contact Vrinda Manocha, Manager-Knowledge Codification and Analysis, at vrinda.manocha@khpt.org