

TB Awareness and Treatment Challenges

By Neway Tsegaye

Tuberculosis (TB) is one of the major killer diseases in Ethiopia. Many think that being a TB patient is the end of the world. But hospital treatment can cure the disease. However every patient needs to take the medicine properly with full adherence to the recommendations of health professionals. Late admissions of patients to health centres and interrupting medicines before finishing prescribed doses are some of the main factors that negatively affect the success of treatment.

Meseret Habtamu is an eleven year old girl suffering from bone TB. She has been under medical care at St. Petros Specialized TB Hospital in Addis Ababa. She recalls she started to feel that there was some thing wrong around her knees. She felt an uneasy, irritating sensation which caused her to itch. Her situation deteriorated progressively and she finally failed to walk as normally as usual. “Before I was admitted to the hospital I had already started to limp,” says Meseret.

According to Shitu Kebede, the mother of Meseret, when the itching symptom appeared on the legs of the girl, she took her to a traditional healer. But nothing was changed. Next the mother took her daughter to a holy water site. The second option also failed to bear any positive result.

Bringing Meseret to St. Petros Hospital was the last alternative that Shitu opted for after six months. By then the mother was forced to carry her 11 years old daughter on her back as the girl was totally unable to walk.

However the medication given to the child has started to positively transform her health conditions. And the mother says, “The treatment that my daughter has been taking is improving her health. But I regret that I did not bring her to the hospital on time.”

According to the Director of St. Petros Hospital, Dr. Bekele Fekadu, TB can affect all parts of the human body except hair and nail. “The disease that Meseret has been infected with is out - of - lung TB,” the physician says, “The treatment given to the girl has required a relatively longer period to produce the needed effect. The patient was never brought to the hospital on time.”

He pointed out that the patient was unable to walk when she was admitted to the hospital, but at present she has regained her mobility and can walk without any support from any one. That is the outcome of appropriate medication as well as adherence to the treatment. It shows that TB patients could regain their health, if they adhere to the proper treatment given at health centres.

Meseret has been treated in the hospital since the last sixty days. Now she will leave. But her medication is not over. She has to go home and take the remaining medicine for the next six months. Adherence to the treatment is a key to success.

Since this eleven years old girl had suffered a lot before she got proper treatment in the hospital, it is hardly possible to conclude ahead that her illness would not have any lasting impact on her future physical condition. At present she has swelling around her knees. According to Dr. Bekele, this may force her to limp. Had she got appropriate treatment on time, this problem could not exist, he says.

Assefa Hailu is another TB patient. He is 35. Though he does not know how he was infected with the disease, he thinks that he contracted it from a colleague, who has had TB at his workplace. "I went to a field work with my colleague and created proximity with him. When I came back home I had a breathing problem and some pain. Now I started to think that the disease was transmitted from my colleague to me," Assefa says, "I had no any idea before how TB passes from person to person."

When he was brought to the hospital he was totally collapsed and unconscious. His weight during admission was only 40 kg. Currently his condition is improving and his weight reached 52 kg. "That is the effect of the treatment given to me," he says.

Assefa has been encouraged by the improvement of his health. Still he has to take TB medicine for the next six months. And he knows that there would be no compromise on taking the treatment. Adherence is the only way to successful medication. "I have learned that adherence is highly rewarding, where as interrupting the treatment could have very serious consequences. I started to feel the improvement of my health after taking the treatment for 35 days. Now I can properly speak and feed myself," he says.

According to Dr. Bekele, a TB patient lets out multitudes of germs on air when sneezes and coughs. Any person with prolonged coughing is advised to go to health centres for diagnosis. In order to prevent the spread of TB causing germs, patients should cover their nose and mouth during sneezing and coughing.

Genet Tadesse, a 28 years old woman, is a TB patient admitted at St. Petros Hospital. Her experience could be a helpful lesson regarding the importance of adherence in taking TB treatment. "After I was admitted in the hospital, I took TB medicine for one month and started to feel healthy and regained my strength. Then I interrupted it, because I thought that it was not necessary any more," Genet says. However her strength was not

lasting. After one year her TB relapsed and she was readmitted to the hospital. This time she tested positive for HIV and started ART. Yet, she went to repeat the same mistake by interrupting the ART after a few months in favour of holy water treatment. But the subsequent deterioration of her health forced her to go back to the hospital.

She is currently taking both ART and TB medicine. She has learned that her mistakes were fatal and would not repeat them. Her health is improving and she has regained her weight. “Here after I will not violate any of the recommendations of my doctors,” she says.

According to Dr. Bekele no patient is advised to stop taking the medicines before having finished all the prescribed dozes. Interrupting the treatment prompts the TB bacteria to develop resistance. This could have a very serious repercussion that could lead to death. To further treat TB patients with resistant strains of the TB bacteria it requires very expensive medicines which are not available in Ethiopia. This worsens the situation of TB patients in poor countries of the world.

All treated patients at St. Petros Hospital have known that the disease could be cured with available medicines if patients properly follow the orders of their doctors.

NB: This translation originally written in Amharic.