Treating tuberculosis in low resource settings: practice pragmatically

Xiaohui Sun MPH, ¹ PhD student

Najib Rahman MD, ^{2,3} Professor of Respiratory Medicine

Abdel Douiri PhD, ^{1,4} Reader of Medial Statistics

¹School of Population Health and Environmental Sciences, King's College London, Guy's Campus, King's College London, London SE1 1UL, UK;

²Oxford Respiratory Trials Unit and Oxford Pleural Diseases Unit, Churchill Hospital, Oxford, England, UK;

³NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at University of Oxford, Oxford, England

⁴NIHR Biomedical Research Centre at Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals London, Great Maze Pond, London SE1 9RT, UK;

Tuberculosis (TB) remains a long-standing life-threatening contagious disease and claimed approximately 1.5 million lives worldwide in 2018. Regional variations occur extensively with polarized incidence rates between low and high TB burden countries (1). Tuberculosis is a social disease in partnership with poverty. Tuberculosis burden fluctuates with the rises and falls of socioeconomic development despite the advancements in healthcare (2). Poverty related components such as poor living conditions and malnutrition, which do not merely increase individual's susceptibility to infection, but affect healthcare expenditure and loss of income associated with TB infection amplify the effect of poverty on TB treatment and prevention. Therefore, combating TB contributes to reducing impoverishment, meanwhile fighting impoverishment assists TB control efforts especially in restricted resource settings (3).

A pragmatic randomised trial conducted by Cohen and colleagues in Malawi has evaluated a novel biosocial model to deliver effective TB in the homecare

setting (4). This study assessed long term daily injection services for the initial treatment phase of recurrent or multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB), with duration of receiving injectable agents ranging from 2 to 8 months. Traditionally, intramuscular injection treatment requires hospitalization, which is costly and increases the risk of hospital-acquired infections (HAI) for such prolonged treatment. However, injectable agents could potentially be administered by trained lay care givers instead, if no additional medical attention was needed. The trial factored in several essential elements that would tackle the barriers for accessing effective TB treatment. First, decentralizing healthcare services would enable better access of effective treatment while overcoming geographic and socioeconomical barriers, further reducing the risk of “catastrophic cost” (5). In this study, catastrophic cost was defined according to WHO approach as total costs incurred by patients’ household that exceed 20% of their annual income. Risk reduction of this cost was observed irrespective of wealth quartile, gender or HIV status. Second, taking regional epidemiological feature into consideration will contribute to harnessing healthcare resources for pro-poor healthcare delivery. This study was conducted in a region with prevalent TB and HIV co-infections with more than 80% of participants were reported as HIV positive. The study aligned interventions for TB treatment with attempts to address HIV and AIDS co-infection in a low resource settings, which coherently integrating social protection context with biomedical intervention (6).

Talking the talk is easier than walking the walk. The authors should be congratulated on completing such a large study in challenging circumstances. Although the trial (designed as non-inferiority) did not complete recruitment, and was therefore somewhat underpowered to declare non-inferiority, the results do provide reassuring evidence of a pragmatic and largely safe approach

in resource limited settings. The key of such solutions relies on training lay-care givers to facilitate intramuscular injections to patients in their own homes. The study underlines the importance of adopting interventions tailored to regional circumstances, allowing delivery of consistent yet quality care to recurrent or MDR-TB patients without increasing the risk of adverse events. This presents a novel opportunity for sustainable home-based management of patients in areas where the total expenditure on health is low, but further operational data to support the findings of this study are still needed.

Reference

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