New WHO report: 100 million people affected by psoriasis, action needed to provide care, overcome discrimination

A new World Health Organization (WHO) report shows that psoriasis, the painful, disfiguring condition involving skin and nails, affects approximately 100 million people worldwide. There is no known cause or cure for this noncommunicable disease (NCD), which is also associated with discrimination and stigmatization of those affected.

Increased action, led by governments, to ensure appropriate care is provided to people living with the disease, and to prevent them suffering discrimination and stigma, are among key measures recommended by the first WHO Global report on psoriasis.

“One way to reduce the burden of psoriasis on people’s lives is through early diagnosis and appropriate treatment,” says Dr Etienne Krug, Director of WHO’s Department for the Management of NCDs, Disability, Violence and Injury Prevention. “Access and affordability of essential medicines are a huge challenge that we see for psoriasis and for NCDs in general.”

The cause of psoriasis remains unclear, although there is evidence for genetic predisposition. The immune system’s role in psoriasis causation is also a major topic of research. Psoriasis can be provoked by external and internal triggers, including mild trauma, sunburn, infections, systemic drugs and stress.

Psoriasis is associated with several comorbidities. Skin lesions are localized or generalized, mostly symmetrical, sharply demarcated, red papules and plaques, and usually covered with white or silver scales. Lesions cause itching, stinging and pain. Between 1.3% and 34.7% of people with psoriasis develop chronic, inflammatory arthritis (psoriatic arthritis) that leads to joint deformations and disability. People with psoriasis are reported to be at increased risk of developing other serious clinical conditions such as cardiovascular and other NCDs.

The Global report on psoriasis aims to help raise awareness of multiple ways the disease can affect peoples’ lives and empower policy-makers with practical solutions to improve the health care and social inclusion of people living with psoriasis in their populations.

The report identifies a range of key actions to improve the lives of people with psoriasis, including:

- Ensuring care for people with psoriasis is included in universal health coverage schemes;
- Improving access to and affordability of essential medicines for psoriasis;
• Providing training for health professionals, especially in primary care settings;
• Developing standardised guidelines for the diagnosis of psoriasis and its treatment;
• Empowering people with psoriasis by creating networks to foster exchange of experiences and fight discrimination;
• Increasing research into psoriasis epidemiology, etiology, association with comorbidities, treatment and ways to improve health care services;
• Taking active steps to reduce the stigma and discrimination that people with psoriasis face, including through enacting anti-discrimination legislation and enforcing existing legislation.

Astrid Sibbes, 57 years old, from the Netherlands, has been affected by the health and social consequences of psoriasis. “Having a serious skin disease at a young age is very difficult,” she says. “Having psoriasis means that in the classroom no one wants to sit next to you. Having psoriasis means not being able to join a sports club. People suffering from psoriasis are not wanted. If I did not have psoriasis, my life would have probably been completely different.”

Kathleen Gallant, Secretary of the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Psoriasis Associations, welcomed the WHO Global report on psoriasis. “We expect this report will raise public awareness about psoriasis holistically (covering all conditions of the disease, including psycho-social) and emphasize the need for global incidence on psoriasis,” she adds.

The report follows the 67th World Health Assembly (2014) endorsement of a resolution on the need to raise awareness of psoriasis and to fight the stigmatization faced by people living with the disease.