

Haiti fights for a brighter future

Philippe Larco and Nancy Charles Larco





The devastating earthquake that struck Haiti on 12 January 2010 killed over 200,000 people and left more than 1.5 million homeless. Two years later, more than half a million people still live in tents in relief camps and 50% of the rubble is yet to be removed. The earthquake exposed infrastructural weaknesses and institutional shortcomings. Haiti is struggling with reconstruction efforts that, according to the authors of this report, have been hampered by political paralysis and the lack of coordination in international aid. Yet from among the debris of Haiti's decimated healthcare system is arising a renewed force capable of protecting the current and future health and wellbeing of people with diabetes.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, healthcare services quickly became saturated by the urgent needs of people rescued from the rubble with multiple trauma. With this extraordinary and overwhelming demand on healthcare, medical attention was diverted away from people with diabetes and hypertension; their cases were not considered urgent. Drug supplies were complicated due to the collapse of several pharmacies in the affected areas. In the days after the earthquake, the Haitian Foundation for Diabetes and Cardiovascular Diseases (FHADIMAC), a private Haitian foundation, was the only organization to provide services to people with diabetes and other chronic diseases. FHADIMAC had been contacted by the Ministry of Public Health and Population (MSPP), which made the Foundation the reference centre for the management of people with diabetes and hypertension. In April 2010, the Ministry and FHADIMAC signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the development and implementation

of a national plan to combat diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Without the intervention of FHADIMAC, diabetes surely would have killed many of the people who had survived the initial impact of the disaster. More than 1500 people affected by chronic disease were seen in the FHADIMAC facilities, and received free care – medical consultations, blood glucose monitoring, medication, educational sessions – for the first six months following the earthquake. Many of these people arrived with high blood glucose, inappropriately treated and with a lack of any diabetes knowledge.

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Improving care

Seeing the poorly supported people who had been transferred from other health institutions confirmed the ex-

istence of a huge need for training of medical staff. In an attempt to meet this need, FHADIMAC decided to develop a national protocol for the treatment of diabetes and launched an extensive training programme for health personnel. This began in February 2011 with sessions for doctors, nurses, pharmacists, laboratory technicians and social workers, and has continued since with numerous seminars over the years. When returning to their respective institutions, these healthcare providers reported feeling more comfortable with the assessment and management of people with diabetes.

Many people were unable to attend appointments due to difficulties making the journey to their clinic. In response, and in addition to its daily clinical premises in downtown Port-au-Prince, FHADIMAC (with the help AmeriCares) opened four outreach clinics throughout the capital. After nine months, that essential work was taken up and extended through another project supported by AmeriCares and the World Diabetes Foundation, which established 12 healthcare centres in the west of the city – the area most affected by the earthquake.

FHADIMAC operates outreach clinics in neighbourhoods throughout the capital, including those most affected by the earthquake.

Screening and awareness

FHADIMAC also conducted a screening campaign in relief camps, churches, workplaces, markets and at public events in order to identify people with diabetes and provide treatment as early as



possible. Some 10,000 people underwent screening in metropolitan Port-au-Prince and several other regions, including Cape Haitien, Les Cayes, Jacmel, Gonaives and Hinche. People identified with diabetes were referred to the closest health centre with trained personnel.

The screening campaign was complemented by intensive diabetes awareness campaigns. Videos, pamphlets and posters about the symptoms of diabetes and hypertension have been released with the support of the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) and the French Society of Diabetes.

Special support for young people

FHADIMAC provided psychological support for young people with diabetes, who received special attention and participated in special sessions with psychologists. In those sessions, children and parents shared their experiences managing diabetes in exceptional circumstances.

In February 2012, FHADIMAC organized its first camp for children and adolescents with diabetes – and some parents.

For several years prior to the earthquake, FHADIMAC had dreamed about organizing a camp for children with diabetes. These camps can provide young people with diabetes with an opportunity to learn and share their knowledge and experiences with their peers. In February 2012, after several months of preparation and with the support of Francine Kaufman (Past President of the American Diabetes Association), Neal Kaufman, Evelyne Fleury-Milfort (University of Southern California) and Merith Basey (from the NGO AYUDA),

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FHADIMAC managed to organize its first camp for children and adolescents with diabetes (and some mothers). It was an amazing experience for the 24 children who took part in this camp. "These days at the camp were undoubtedly the happiest days of my life," declared one of the camp participants.

In June 2010, FHADIMAC joined IDF's Life For A Child programme. Currently, more than 50 children in Haiti are supported by this project and the aim is to reach 150 per year.

Advocating policy change

For several years, FHADIMAC has been striving to push chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like diabetes and hypertension up the agenda of the Ministry of Health of Haiti. After several meetings with authorities, FHADIMAC was invited to form part of the government delegation that attended the UN high-Level Meeting on NCDs in September 2011.

After that historic UN summit, FHADIMAC continued its advocacy work and established with the Ministry of Health the National Committee Against NCDs. Other Haitian institutions working in the field of NCDs, particularly cancer, are part of this committee.

Fighting adversity for a brighter future

To meet the needs of the community and the demand for services in diabetes, FHADIMAC has had to double its staff. Our premises quickly became too small

as the number of referrals increased daily. NGOs and health institutions regularly contact FHADIMAC for training or for support to manage people with diabetes. FHADIMAC now plans to expand its activities and develop several sections to take care of screening and treatment for diabetes complications.

The earthquake of January 2010 was an opportunity for FHADIMAC to intensify its struggle to defend the rights of people with diabetes and develop a comprehensive programme of diabetes awareness and support. The ongoing lack of human and financial resources continues to limit the actions of FHADIMAC. However, thanks to the dedicated approach of its employees and supporters, the Foundation is trying to carry out a range of activities to ensure a better life for people affected by diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

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