

Look how far we have progressed - the case for The Bahamas to focus on Non-Communicable Diseases

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Author: Francis K. Poitier*

*Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, University of Leeds

Corresponding Author:

Francis K. Poitier, Ph.D.

Email: F.Poitier@leeds.ac.uk

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As The Bahamas celebrates its golden jubilee by reflecting on how far we have come and look to the future development of our Nation, the health and wellbeing of our people must be high on the agenda.

Since the early 1960s, with the establishment of the Department of Public Health, The Bahamas has made health care available for all citizens.¹ Our early focus on providing health care for all saw many achievements, including tackling communicable diseases, establishing an effective vaccination programme, building health infrastructure across our archipelago, and increasing life expectancy.² These successes have been challenged in recent times with the outbreak of COVID-19. The systems built over our history to claim many of the achievements mentioned above were tested to breaking point. It was a poignant reminder that, as a Nation, we must safeguard our progress by prioritising investments in the health and well-being of our people.

A starting point for this could be tackling the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). NCDs, sometimes called chronic diseases, are illnesses which are not directly spread between people but can have long durations.³ In 2016, the State of the Nation report noted that levels of obesity, hypertension and diabetes were increasing, including in youth and children. This alarm was echoed in the STEPS Survey Report of 2019, which identified that more Bahamians are dying at younger ages as healthy years are reduced due to disease or disability.⁴ Our population's high burden of these diseases has economic and societal costs as household expenses are drained on fees for medicines and treatment, absenteeism from work, and additional caring responsibilities for families. These issues are especially pronounced for the poor and vulnerable in our society.

The Ministry of Health of The Bahamas has long acknowledged the public health threat of NCDs and the need for a Health in All policies approach to tackle their complexities. It is an acknowledgement that the health ministry alone cannot address the multiple factors contributing to the increasing disease prevalence. NCDs are at the nexus of health, economics, society and politics. Therefore actions to address the issue comprehensively will result from multiple sectors coming together to prioritise the health and well-being of our people. Too often, however, profits and politics slow or erase progress where large private sector companies 'pay the piper' and political cycles or changes in administration halt implementing activities.⁵

¹ Dahl-Regis, Merceline. *Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2004 - 2008*. Ministry of Health of The Bahamas (Nassau, Bahamas: 2010).

² NDP Secretariat. *State of the Nation Report*. (Nassau, Bahamas: April 2016).

³ "Noncommunicable Diseases." World Health Organization, 2022, accessed 9 July 2023, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>.

⁴ BMOH. *Bahamas Steps 2019 Report: Non-Communicable Diseases and Risk Factors in the Bahamian Society*. The Ministry of Health and Wellness (Nassau: 2022). <https://www.bahamas.gov.bs/wps/wcm/connect/cb064c38-7c0b-41c2-b812-986ab18d02ab/STEPS+VOL+1+eBook+%5BFinal%5D.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>

⁵ Poitier, Francis, Ricky Kalliecharan, and Basseyy Ebenso. "Impact of Sustained Health Policy and Population-Level Interventions on Reducing the Prevalence of Obesity in the Caribbean Region: A Qualitative Study from the Bahamas." [In English]. Original Research. *Frontiers in Public Health* 10 (2022-August-30 2022). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2022.926672>.

Historically, The Bahamas has led in addressing factors associated with NCDs. In the early 2000s, the country was among the first in the Caribbean to develop local dietary food guidelines. It also signed the historic Port-of-Spain Declaration of 2007, recognising the need to address NCDs. The National Multi-sectoral Non-Communicable Disease Strategy 2017-2022 initiated the first steps of the health ministry working alongside the private sector and civil society to promote the prevention and control of NCDs. There is a need to build on these historical feats. For example, we can implement new transformative approaches by 1) declaring NCDs a national emergency; 2) adopting best buys which address system-level factors; 3) empowering communities through healthy food environments, and; 4) developing and funding a national research agenda focused on NCDs as a priority.

As we look toward the next 50 years of our Nation's development, we must move forward, upward and onward toward a national agenda that sees our people thriving in their health and well-being.