



Diabetes in South Africa: Assessing the Data with Fear and Trembling

Recent data from the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) estimates that 7 % of South Africans between the ages of 21 and 79 years have diabetes ⁽¹⁾. Based on the latest population estimates for South Africa ⁽²⁾, this means that 3.85 million South Africans in this age group may have diabetes. However, these statistics only shed light on the surface of a much deeper problem.

To fully appreciate the current statistics on the prevalence of diabetes in South Africa, one needs to look back. In 2010, the prevalence of type 2 diabetes in South Africa was estimated at 4.5 % ⁽³⁾. Thus, a 155 % increase in 6 years! Such data begs the question – what will the prevalence be in 6 years from now? Will there be another 155 % increase, with 5.97 million adults living with diabetes, or will the increase be even greater?

Additionally, the data is grossly uncertain. A closer look the prevalence data from the 2015 Edition of the IDF Diabetes Atlas, indicates that the uncertainty range of the given prevalence is between 3.6 and 14.1 % ⁽¹⁾. With such a large range, one can deduce that the data is rather a ‘guesstimate’ based on imperfect data. The truth of the situation is that we do not know the true extent of the problem.

What about those who are undiagnosed, living blissfully unaware while diabetes remains in hiding? The limited data suggest that there are 0.630 to 2.394 million people with undiagnosed diabetes ⁽¹⁾.

Impaired glucose tolerance (IGT) or ‘intermediate hyperglycaemia’ may cast a picture of what it is to come. Approximately 30 % of people with IGT develop diabetes within 11 years ⁽⁴⁾. In 2013, it was estimated that 2.653 million people in South Africa have IGT ⁽⁵⁾. Thus, a further 795 900 from this population may develop diabetes within 11 years. Given that rates of progression from IGT to diabetes in South Africa are unclear, could it be more than 30 % over 11 years?

What of those with type 1 diabetes, of whom no data exists? Globally, type 1 diabetes is increasing - for the first time, it is estimated that half a million people live with this condition ⁽¹⁾. Will we be able to handle the greater needs of this vulnerable population?

What of the financial implications of this epidemic? The cost per person per annum with diabetes was approximately R 5 000 in 2010 and R 26 743.69 in 2015 ⁽¹⁾. Such data presents the cost of treating diabetes but fails to address the cost of a ‘loss of man power’. Alarming, 60–80 % of people with diabetes in South Africa die before the age of 60 - the working class ⁽¹⁾. Throwing money at the problem of diabetes also is not realistic. The World Bank suggest that no more than 5 % of a country’s gross



domestic profit (GDP) should be spent on health. In South Africa, 8.9 % of GDP is spent on health ⁽⁶⁾Error! No bookmark name given. . Thus, South Africa cannot afford to spend more money on health.

At best we have estimates on how many people have diabetes in South Africa, but what of their glycaemic control? How many have received diabetes education, have had their feet cared for and how many are living with diabetes related complications? Maybe many prefer not to know...

“Big Talk and quoting statistics have little value if we do not do initiatives which improve the lives of all our people with diabetes” Dr Shaukat Sadiko, International Diabetes Federation President.



References:

1. International Diabetes Federation. IDF Diabetes Atlas. Seventh Edition. Brussels, IDF. 2015.
2. Statistics South Africa. South Africa. Mid-year population estimates 2015. 2015 (July). Available from: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0302/P03022015.pdf>
3. International Diabetes Federation. IDF diabetes atlas 4th Edition. Brussels, IDF. 2009;
4. Söderberg S, Zimmet P, Tuomilehto J, de Courten M, Dowse GK, Chitson P, et al. High incidence of type 2 diabetes and increasing conversion rates from impaired fasting glucose and impaired glucose tolerance to diabetes in Mauritius. *J Intern Med.* 2004 Jul;256(1):37–47.
5. International Diabetes Federation. IDF Diabetes Atlas Sixth edition. Brussels, IDF. 2013.
6. The World Bank. Health expenditure, total (% GDP) [Internet]. 2016. Available from: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.TOTL.ZS>