BAME diabetes – the role of the South Asian Health Foundation

South Asian people are particularly vulnerable to Type 2 diabetes and its complications, and prevention efforts encounter some specific barriers. **Kamlesh Khunti** and **Wasim Hanif**, Co-Chairs of the South Asian Health Foundation Diabetes Working Group, describe how they are going about addressing the health challenges faced by this population.

It is estimated that there are 415 million people with diabetes worldwide, with South Asians compromising the largest ethnic group with the condition. Furthermore, people of South Asian origin (people of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent) now comprise the majority ethnic group in many developed countries. Certain ethnic groups, such as South Asian people, have a much higher prevalence of Type 2 diabetes, with microvascular and cardiovascular complications occurring at an earlier age and being associated with premature mortality. India has the highest prevalence of Type 2 diabetes globally (after China) and current projections are that, by 2020, South Asians will account for 40 per cent of the global cardiovascular burden. Furthermore, migrant South Asians have a two to six times greater prevalence of Type 2 diabetes compared with the background population they migrate to. Studies have shown that South Asians suffer up to 50 per cent higher coronary heart disease mortality rates compared with indigenous White Europeans in the UK, although there has been evidence of declining cardiovascular mortality in this group in recent years.

**Increased vulnerability**

The reason for the heightened risk of Type 2 diabetes in South Asian populations is not entirely clear, but is thought to be mainly related to increased beta cell failure and high prevalence of insulin resistance, central obesity and related atherogenic risk factors in this population. An increased genetic predisposition has been suggested, although no definitive genes have been identified to account for this increased risk. Research evidence suggests that factors associated with urban lifestyle/migration, such as a high-calorie diet and lack of physical activity, further enhance the underlying insulin resistance and consequent cardiovascular risk.

Factors such as cultural health beliefs, language difficulties, educational level, socio-economic status and inequalities in access to healthcare have been shown to further adversely impact on the effective management and outcome in this population. Recent studies have also shown that risk-related thresholds for body mass index and waist circumference are significantly lower in South Asians living in the UK and in India than they are for White populations.
**BIOGRAPHY**

**WASIM HANIF**
is Professor of Diabetes & Endocrinology, Consultant Physician, University Hospital Birmingham.
He is the Clinical Academic Group Lead for research in Diabetes & Endocrinology at the Institute of Translation Medicine, Birmingham.
Prof Hanif is a member of the Parliamentary and Stakeholder Diabetes Think Tank advising the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Diabetes. He is also on the Board of Governors as a Trustee of Diabetes UK, helping in strategy, advocacy, patient empowerment and research to help improve outcomes in people with diabetes in the UK.

**THE SOUTH ASIAN HEALTH FOUNDATION**

The South Asian Health Foundation (SAHF) is a registered charity founded in 1999 to promote good health in the UK’s South Asian communities. The SAHF is one of the UK’s leading British Asian health charities promoting improvements in healthcare, health promotion and research in the UK’s South Asian communities. It provides health information and resources, runs expert conferences, acts as an advocacy group and promotes research into UK South Asian health. The key aims of SAHF are to:

- promote improvements in the quality of, and access to, healthcare in South Asians
- promote improvements in the quality and access to health promotion in South Asians
- promote relevant research
- harness and disseminate good practice.

To promote these aims, SAHF has been running a successful diabetes conference for the past 12 years. This year, we again saw an increase in the number of delegates attending the SAHF Diabetes Conference in Birmingham in October.

**THE PREVENTION CHALLENGE**

There is now compelling evidence that lifestyle intervention is of major benefit in the prevention of diabetes. However, South Asians face a number of barriers when it comes to implementing prevention efforts. These barriers include certain health beliefs and practices relating to diet, attitudes to physical activity, religious beliefs, levels of underlying knowledge about diabetes and attitudes to the concept of self-management.

To understand the impact of culture on diabetes, we need to look at a number of factors, including migration, diet, physical activity, tobacco use, socio-economic status, language barriers, and access to health services and attitudes to medical treatment.

An evidence base and guidelines on primary and secondary prevention of diabetes and cardiovascular disease in specific different ethnic groups are lacking. There is a need to raise awareness among different ethnic groups about the risks for cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes, for improving lifestyle factors and increasing their participation in research.

While more research is awaited in this area, there is a need to implement current guidelines on primary and secondary prevention of cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes, and implement them more aggressively to improve the increased risk in this population. Different models of care are required – tailored to the needs of different ethnic groups. There is, therefore, a need to educate and inform those delivering care to the South Asian community.

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Current projections are that, by 2020, South Asians will account for 40 per cent of the global cardiovascular burden.

The conference included key speakers from health policy to academia. Some of the work presented at the event appears in the articles that follow in this special issue of Update. The SAHF also promotes South Asian health by the presentation of Lifetime Achievement awards to people who have promoted South Asian health through research, policy or advocacy. This year’s Lifetime Achievement award was presented to Dr Shaukat Sadikot, who is an eminent Consultant Endocrinologist in Mumbai and currently President of the International Diabetes Federation (page 9).

The SAHF has been part of, and provided input into, 67 NICE guidelines to improve patient care. As a part of the South Asian Community Health Education (SACHE) programme over the last seven years, the SAHF has been running community education patient empowerment programmes. The SACHE programme had a House of Commons launch in 2009 and, in 2015, it received the BMJ award for best community care diabetes project. In terms of academic networks, SAHF is in touch with international researchers interested in South Asian diabetes. The Foundation took part in an international symposium on diabetes in South Asians organised at the International Diabetes Federation conference in Vancouver in 2015 and at the American Diabetes Association conference in New Orleans earlier this year.

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