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September 29 is World Heart Day. For the past five years, the Novartis Foundation has been working to improve cardiovascular health in low-income urban populations. Preliminary results from its flagship Better Hearts Better Cities initiative show exciting potential to transform population-wide cardiovascular health around the world.

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a general term for conditions affecting the heart or blood vessels. Although average CVD mortality rates have fallen by 61% in the past 50 years, CVD remains the number one killer worldwide, causing 18 million deaths each year.

The Foundation’s cardiovascular population health initiatives focus on urban populations because many of the risk factors for cardiovascular diseases are particularly prevalent in cities – from air pollution to access to unhealthy food and beverages, and sedentary lifestyles. In addition, the Foundation’s initiatives have shown that transforming healthcare in major cities provides powerful evidence to encourage governments to scale-up programs nation-wide.

Today, the Foundation’s cardiovascular population health approach is built on Better Hearts Better Cities, an initiative that improved hypertension control in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; Dakar, Senegal; and São Paulo, Brazil. Hypertension is the prime risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

The Novartis Foundation co-created Better Hearts with local authorities in each city, drawing in partners from every sector that influences people’s health. The partnership strengthened the entire care pathway, from awareness to screening, diagnosis and ongoing care. And it worked. Preliminary results found blood pressure control tripled in São Paulo and increased eight-fold in Dakar. This is important because controlling blood pressure reduces the risk of cardiovascular events such as heart attacks and strokes. In fact, in Dakar, the preliminary results indicated a 20% reduction in strokes and coronary heart disease after just two years of implementation.

Taking a population-wide approach to heart health involves schools, too, because hypertension also affects children. The Novartis Foundation and partners’ KaziBantu program aims to improve the health of schoolchildren and their teachers. The initiative includes physical activity, which is critical given that children with higher fitness levels have lower cardiovascular risk.

All the Foundation’s initiatives are underpinned by data, digital and AI. AI4BetterHearts, a new cardiovascular data collaborative with Microsoft, will apply AI to help policy makers, health workers and patients better manage heart health.

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