We can eradicate tuberculosis in our lifetimes

BY DR. ANA LOPEZ-DEFIDE • APRIL 11, 2009

Many people mistakenly believe that TB is a disease occurring mostly in the Third World or developing countries. But it is a problem here in the United States and especially in South Carolina, which consistently ranks among the top 10 states in the number of new cases. The Palmetto State has about 6.2 cases per 100,000 people versus 4.2 nationally. African-Americans in our state are disproportionately represented in the number, having three times the rate of the national average.

I had the privilege last November of participating in the 38th Union World Conference on Lung Health in Cape Town, South Africa. Among those who made the trip with me were two people from South Carolina who have successfully battled TB. Unlike many, they received a TB diagnosis early enough to be treated successfully; and they completed the disease’s treatment regimen that can be grueling and tedious.

Our shared purpose in traveling to South Africa was to lend their voices, their experiences and their commitment in an effort to eradicate this treatable, curable but still deadly disease. Often, the main diagnostic tool available is the sputum test, a procedure invented in 1882. Like the sputum test, the only medicines available to treat TB are from another era. TB treatment, invented three to five decades ago, requires patients to take four to six pills every day for up to six months or longer. In an age of unparalleled medical advances, we must refuse to accept that millions of people will be left to perish needlessly.

In Cape Town, as hundreds of people took to the streets to demand improved treatment and support for people with the disease, it was hard to lose sight of what a tremendous threat TB is to our own citizens and the world population.

What is the face of tuberculosis? Who has the disease? The World Health Organization estimates that each person with TB infects 10 to 15 other people, usually by coughing the germs into the air. Once the bacteria reach a new host, they can progress to disease or be carried around for years or decades, only to cause the illness later on in others. A robust immune system is needed to contain the infection. 8 to 10 percent of these healthy people exposed to TB go on to develop the disease.

In short, the face of this disease is anyone who has been exposed to someone with TB. It can be health-care workers such as the late Dr. Claudia Amaya-Lescón, a physician with a degree in public health who lived in South Carolina and later in Atlanta. Despite her access to quality medical care, she and her unborn child died.

Although the face of TB could be yours or mine, the disease is most often contracted by those with limited access to health care.

The South Africa trip led to a declaration – a call to action – in whichTankers and advocates identified three key things that must happen for the fight against TB to be successful. First, eliminating TB requires recognition of its determinants within a context of poverty and health-care disparity. TB, in and of itself, does not kill a person. Rather, long-term disability and death are often caused by an overall lack of access to timely, quality health care and a lack of vital support services. Stigma, discrimination and neglect surrounding the disease play a major role in many people not getting the treatment they need.

Second, the elimination of TB requires the participation of people affected by TB at all levels. TB patients need patient-centered care that extends beyond the six to 18-plus months required to complete the medications. A commitment must be made to assist the person in re-establishing his or her life beyond the completion of treatment for the disease.

Third, the elimination of TB requires stable, global funding. Funds must be put in place to prevent poor and vulnerable populations from TB in all its forms by ensuring access to vaccines, to timely and accurate diagnosis and to a universal standard of care worldwide. Likewise, it takes dollars to support community-based and nongovernmental organizations that are working to strengthen the support systems of individuals affected by the disease.

Monday, March 24, was World TB Day. Please join me in this call to action to eradicate TB. Get involved. Learn the facts. Support a local organization that is helping to control TB. Together, we can and must take the necessary action to eliminate this disease within our lifetimes.