Women's kidney health: collaborations for gender-sensitive policies

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World Kidney Day (WKD) and International Women's Day both take place on March 8th. To mark the occasion, WKD's founders – the International Society of Nephrology (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations (IFKF) – have joined forces with the Taskforce on Women and NCDs to raise vital awareness on women's kidney health.

Women face major issues when it comes to their kidney health, especially during pregnancy. In this blog, WKD Campaign Manager Agnese Ruggiero reflects on the needs surrounding these issues, and makes an urgent call to policy makers to implement proven gender-sensitive prevention and treatment policies throughout the lifecycle of girls and women.

Kidney disease and pregnancy: facing the challenges

About 195 million women live with CKD worldwide. CKD is currently the 8th leading cause of death, with close to 600,000 female deaths each year. The risk of developing CKD is at least as high in women as in men, and may even be higher. Furthermore, kidney health is closely linked to maternal health: pregnancy-related complications can increase the risk of kidney disease and, in turn, women who already have CKD are at increased risk of negative outcomes in pregnancy, both in the mother and the baby.

In developed countries, doctors will try everything to allow a woman on dialysis to fulfil her wish of motherhood. However, women in places where dialysis is less available or who are not economically able to access this treatment may simply be advised not to have children. This is because – without proper treatment – the kidney condition can prevent successful completion of a pregnancy while significantly deteriorating the kidney function of the mother – potentially to a fatal degree. Such a diagnosis can be devastating to any woman, especially in countries where the inability to bear children can have strong negative social repercussions.

Those women with CKD who do attempt to have a child are very likely to face difficulties in conceiving – failure to ovulate and miscarriage are very common results of CKD in women.

Other outcomes include menstrual irregularities and early onset of menopause, as well as sexual dysfunctions. Women are also more often affected by certain kinds of kidney diseases such as lupus nephritis (a kidney disease caused by an autoimmune disease) and pyelonephritis (kidney infection).

Studies have shown that women who perform dialysis more than 24 hours per week are more likely to have a successful birth – unfortunately this is not an option for many women around the globe who are not able to access dialysis. Similarly, a kidney transplant can reduce some of the effects of kidney disease on maternal health, but again, often times, this is simply not an option due to long waits for donor organs and economic barriers.

> *The picture doesn't need to be so bleak. Most cases of CKD are preventable and – especially if detected early – treatable. This is why we need targeted policies and urgent action to support women in terms of prevention, treatment and care.*

Joining forces in advocacy

While these issues may not receive the attention they require, various organisations are involved in advocacy work to better address the kidney health of women, regardless of where they live.

> *In the case of the partnership between the WKD founders and the Taskforce on Women and NCDs, the combination of knowledge and expertise in the areas of kidney health, women's health and NCD advocacy and awareness raising has resulted in a strong call to action from governments on an issue that has so far been neglected: the fact that women face unique challenges regarding their kidney health.*

The Taskforce has done some great work in bringing attention to the burden of NCDs in women. With the growing burden of kidney disease and the increasing importance of women's health on the global policy agenda, our partnership with them aims to highlight some of the major issues facing women when it comes to their kidney health, particularly during pregnancy. These issues require targeted policies and urgent attention of policy makers.

Making a statement for the kidney health of women and girls

There is an urgent need for targeted, gender-sensitive prevention and treatment throughout the lifecycle of girls and women. That's why, on March 8th, **a joint statement will be launched by the two partner organisations** to mark both World Kidney Day and International Women's Day. It will provide clear guidance to public health leaders and international policy makers. The statement highlights current evidence and key challenges in the areas of kidney disease and maternal and child health, access to kidney care and prevention of kidney disease, and sets out concrete policy recommendations to address these issues.

We hope that this statement will be widely used by all our partners and supporters in their efforts to advocate for kidney health for women and girls worldwide. The joint statement will be available on the WKD website on March 8th: http://www.worldkidneyday.org/2018-campaign/kidney-disease-women-call-action/ [1]

About the Author

Agnese Ruggiero holds a Matster's degree in Global Health and Development from Maastricht University. She joined the International Society of Nepholorgy in 2012 and has been involved in the World Kidney Day (@worldkidneyday [2]) campaign since 2013.

About the partners

World Kidney Day [3] (WKD) is a global campaign that aims to raise awareness of the importance of the kidneys to overall health and to reduce the frequency and impact of kidney disease and its associated health problems

worldwide. WKD started in 2006 and is a joint initiative of the International Society of Nephrology [4] (ISN) and the International Federation of Kidney Foundations [5] (IFKF).

The Taskforce on Women and Non-Communicable Diseases **[6]** was created in 2011 to respond to the unique and growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) on women in low- and middle-income countries. The Taskforce brings together fourteen global health organizations from the women's health and NCD communities.

References

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2- https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-compare/ [8]

3- https://www.kidney.org/atoz/content/pregnancy [9]

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Tags: world days [10]
Women's Day [11]
World Kidney Day [12]

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[1] http://www.worldkidneyday.org/2018-campaign/kidney-disease-women-call-action/
[2] https://twitter.com/worldkidneyday
[3] http://www.worldkidneyday.org/
[4] http://www.theisn.org/
[5] http://www.ifkf.org/
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