A CALL TO ACTION: Sepsis is Africa’s Neglected Silent Killer

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Sepsis is a major preventable killer, disproportionately affecting low and middle income countries including much of Africa

2. The massive human and financial costs attributable to sepsis are severely under-estimated due to lack of data, research and evidence on sepsis, particularly in Africa

3. Many lives can be saved by efforts to raise awareness on and prioritise sepsis

4. Addressing sepsis will improve overall quality of health care and strengthen health systems

CONTEXT

Sepsis is a life-threatening condition resulting from severe infection and is a leading cause of preventable death worldwide. With its high burden of infection, Africa is expected to bear a disproportionate proportion of global sepsis. The huge human and financial costs associated with sepsis can be attributable to its under-prioritisation in health systems, in terms of resourcing, surveillance, and reporting. In low and middle-income countries (LMICs), including much of Africa, a significant proportion of sepsis can be attributed to the consequences of weak health systems, including poor sanitation and hygiene as well as poor quality health care. Priority investments for preventing sepsis in Africa include: introducing awareness and advocacy campaigns, improving sanitation and hygiene in health facilities, measuring and collecting data on sepsis, and conducting research to fill in sepsis management evidence gaps. Actionable policy recommendations are outlined later in this brief.

What is Sepsis?

Sepsis is defined as the body’s overwhelming and toxic response to infection—leading to tissue damage, organ failure, and often death. Sepsis is caused when infectious organisms, found both within and outside of health clinics and hospitals, spread throughout the whole body. Patients who develop sepsis may experience a range of symptoms that are often related to where the infection originated. Common symptoms include feeling weak, chills/fever, hypothermia, nausea, low blood pressure, and fast heart rate. If sepsis progresses, patients may experience confusion or reduced consciousness, reduced urination, severe breathlessness, inability to stand or walk unaided, multiple organ failure, shock and death.

Because there is no accurate and simple method to test for sepsis, it is typically diagnosed by doctors based on patient history, symptoms, and blood tests. However, this approach often results in inconsistent and delayed diagnoses, which jeopardise the likelihood of patients’ full-recovery. If caught early, sepsis can typically be treated with antibiotics, while failing organs can be supported with fluids, oxygen and other drugs. The best way to prevent sepsis is by reducing infection rates through improved sanitation and hygiene and vaccines. To avoid sepsis from progressing to severe illness and disability, early identification and treatment of infections—including source control and antibiotics—is critical.
Burden of Sepsis

Human Costs

More than 30 million people get sepsis every year, with over 7 million of them ending in death. Although country and continent-specific data on sepsis are lacking, LMICs, including many African countries, are expected to be disproportionately burdened by sepsis where rates of infection are growing. In fact, at least 2 million sepsis deaths are estimated to occur in Africa. These statistics, however, are presumed to be gross underestimates, particularly across Africa, where sepsis is rarely diagnosed, reported, or registered as cause of death.

Neonates and Children

Sepsis is associated with a massive number of life years lost as it kills many youth and children. Globally, an estimated 3 million newborns and 1.2 million children suffer from sepsis every year. In LMICs, infections (including those that result in sepsis) cause up to half of all neonatal mortality. Additionally, each year, 1 million newborn deaths are associated with maternal infection, including sepsis.

Pregnant Women and Mothers

Sepsis is the third biggest cause of maternal mortality, accounting for 11% of global maternal deaths. Over 95% of deaths due to maternal sepsis occur in LMICs. Accounting for two-thirds of maternal deaths, Africa is expected to have high rates of maternal mortality attributed to sepsis.

Financial Costs

Although only available for high income countries (HICs), estimates on the financial burden of sepsis indicate massive universal costs. An average sepsis patient in Europe, for example, is estimated to cost the healthcare system 25,000 Euros. Meanwhile in 2008, the United States spent an estimated $14.6 billion USD on sepsis hospitalisations.

Because sepsis is underreported in LMICs, the real financial burden in Africa is unknown but includes direct costs to the healthcare system, as well as indirect costs to the economy due to losing previously healthy working-age persons.

Why does sepsis exist?

Poor sanitation and hygiene

Since sepsis is caused by infection, poor sanitation and hygiene play an important role. A 2017 progress report found that Sub-Saharan Africa is not meeting the sustainable development goal (SDG) targets for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Specifically, only a little over half of drinking water services were deemed as either safely managed (24%) or basic (34%). Additionally, there was only 28% coverage of basic sanitation services and 15% coverage of basic handwashing facilities with soap and water. Such poor sanitation and hygiene lead to high levels of healthcare associated infections (HAIs), including sepsis. In fact, the frequency of HAIs is at least 2-3 times higher in LMICs than in HICs. For example, data show that 20% of women in Africa acquire surgical site infection after caesarean section.

Under-Vaccination and Immunisation

Vaccines are a principle method of reducing risk of infection. However, in many LMICs, like much of Africa, vaccination frequencies vary by illness, region, population, and year. Currently, national immunisation programmes across Africa cover basic immunisation for seven out of ten infants each year, a massive improvement from only decades earlier. However, disparities in vaccination and immunisation hamper the advancements that have been made. While 12 Sub-Saharan countries report over 71% of children 12-23 months receiving all 8 basic vaccinations, 29 countries have under 71% coverage, including 9 countries with under 39% coverage. Sub-national immunisation rates also vary. In Uganda, for example, national immunisation coverage is 55%. In the majority of regions, however, coverage is between 38% and 54%, with over 70% coverage only in two regions. Such statistics are evidence that further immunisation efforts are needed in the region.

Inadequate Infection Management and Overall Poor Quality Health Care

Inadequate infection prevention and control (IPC) is ultimately a result of inadequate quality health care and is leading to emerging problems like antimicrobial resistance (AMR). In fact, an estimated 30% of deaths due to neonatal sepsis are caused by resistant pathogens. To date, there is minimal research on indicators for quality of health care in LMICs. Most of the studies are limited to a few health facilities and are therefore not generalisable to entire countries, let alone regions and continents. Poor health outcomes among Africans, however, indicate overall weak regional health systems and quality of health care.

Efforts to address sepsis are notoriously cross-cutting and are critical for achieving the United Nation’s targets in SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing (specifically targets 3.1 maternal mortality; 3.2 neonatal and under 5 mortality; 3.3 infectious diseases; 3.8 universal health coverage), which are set to expire in 2030. Improving sepsis diagnosis, treatment and prevention will: a) improve IPC; b) reduce preventable death and its impact on the economy; c) reduce impact of AMR; d) reduce disability; e) improve neonatal health; f) improve maternal health; and g) reduce sepsis-related death among patients with infectious diseases (especially HIV, tuberculosis and malaria). More broadly, addressing sepsis will improve health facilities’ quality of care and strengthen health systems.

Benefits of taking action against sepsis

Evidence from targeted investments to address sepsis demonstrate notable returns. The United Kingdom, for example, has seen improvement in care for patients with severe infections and critical illnesses and reductions in mortality due to severe bacterial infections. In New York, a sepsis improvement mandate was met with a 50% reduction in sepsis mortality over six years in one of the United States’ largest health care systems. Similarly, early sepsis management interventions in Australia and
What is needed to prevent sepsis in Africa?

**Awareness, Education and Training**

Despite its massive death toll, sepsis remains widely unknown and under-prioritised—by the general public, health care workers, and influential decision-makers. In fact, sepsis under-diagnosis and under-reporting are consequences of the lack of awareness on sepsis as well as drivers of its under-prioritisation. Targeted advocacy and awareness campaigns are therefore urgently needed.

In addition, health practitioners’ education and training need to integrate IPC, including how to identify, diagnose, treat and prevent sepsis. An up-to-date global clinical management sepsis guide is needed and once developed, health practitioners should be trained to use the guidelines. Priority health practitioners include medical and other allied health students, doctors, nurses and midwives—who have a unique role in addressing sepsis among women and newborns.

**Data, Research and Evidence**

Unlike other major killers, little is known about sepsis, particularly in Africa. Because data on sepsis are not collected, its real burden is unknown. Therefore, sepsis needs to be measured—including the number of sepsis cases, deaths attributable to sepsis, and cost of treating sepsis patients. Further research on sepsis is needed to fill critical knowledge gaps. Priority research questions/areas particularly in LMICs and across Africa include:

1. Robust LMIC-relevant clinical trials of novel treatments and clinical management bundles

2. Measuring and identifying sepsis in health centres and communities within low-resource settings (where 60-80% of sepsis cases are acquired)

3. Identifying best practices for integrating sepsis and IPC into health systems

4. Understanding country-specific contexts for sepsis, including economic impact

5. Case studies on (un)successful interventions, programmes and policies addressing sepsis

6. Observational studies to optimise clinical diagnosis, management and policy—including:
   a. Comparison and validation of case definitions
   b. Evaluation of laboratory tests (including biomarkers) which could be helpful in LMICs
   c. Aetiological identification, including endemic diseases not common in HICs

**Improved sanitation and hygiene in health care facilities**

Because of the strong link between sepsis and infection, sanitation and hygiene need to be improved in health service facilities. This improvement includes providing access to clean drinking water, increased compliance with hand washing, sanitary food preparation, and sterilising medical tools and equipment. Such measures should be prioritised as they are extremely cost-effective, especially in low-resource environments.

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**Improving sepsis diagnosis, treatment and prevention will:**

- Improve infection prevention and control
- Improve neonatal health
- Improve maternal health
- Reduce sepsis-related death among patients with infectious diseases, especially HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- Reduce preventable death and its impact on the economy
- Reduce impact of anti-microbial resistance
- Reduce disability
- Improve the quality of care at health facilities, and strengthen health systems

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**Benefits of taking action against sepsis**

Efforts to address sepsis are notably cross-cutting and are critical for achieving the United Nation’s targets in SDG 3: Good Health and Wellbeing, specifically targets 3.1 maternal mortality, 3.2 neonatal and under-5 mortality, 3.3 infectious diseases; 3.8 universal health coverage.
To reduce risk of infection, vaccinations are imperative. Immunisations are key public health interventions, and many existing vaccines can prevent causes of sepsis (e.g., meningitis, pneumonia, cholera, typhoid). Governments should prioritise these preventive strategies, using international recommendations and local knowledge to design and administer their immunisation programmes.

Sepsis often occurs because of a failure of the health system. It frequently reflects the fact that IPC measures are not in place (including AMR preventive measures), sanitation, hygiene and quality of health care are substandard, and/or health practitioners are not adequately trained and supported. Due to its intersectional nature, sepsis cannot be addressed as an isolated health issue. To comprehensively address sepsis, sepsis prevention and treatment must be incorporated into broader health systems, IPC and disease surveillance. As such, sepsis prevention and management should constitute key indicators of health care quality and health systems’ performance.

The following recommendations are based on existing evidence on sepsis and build upon the aforementioned conditions that are needed to prevent sepsis in Africa.

The World Health Assembly’s 2017 resolution recommends member states develop national action plans to improve sepsis prevention, recognition, management, and rehabilitation (countries can use the World Health Organisation’s national sepsis action plan template once it is developed)\(^5\). The action plans should have corresponding implementation guides with performance indicators and targets to ensure policy is translated into practice. The action plans and implementation guides should include budget allocations with anticipated short and long-term funding sources.

Coordinated action by various stakeholders is needed to comprehensively address sepsis. National technical working groups, led by Ministries of Health, are impactful platforms to synchronise cross-sector stakeholder action, avoid duplication of efforts and maximise impact.

Sepsis is a massive global burden, particularly afflicting LMICs which include much of Africa. Collective and concerted action is urgently needed to save lives and avoid deaths from sepsis. Priority investments include raising awareness on sepsis, filling in data and evidence gaps on sepsis, and integrating sepsis into health systems’ IPC and disease surveillance.

This brief was prepared by Emma Heneine, Knowledge Translation Officer (AFIDEF), with contributions from Emmanual Nautebu (Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospital NHS Trust), Jamie Rylance (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine) and Shevin Jacob (Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine).

\(^5\)World Health Assembly. [2017]. Improving the prevention, diagnosis and clinical management of sepsis, Agenda Item 12.2, WHA70.7 World Health Assembly Resolution.


\(^7\)IGO.