

TB in the Workplace – the Case of Garment Workers in Bangladesh

The Opportunity

In Bangladesh, TB is still a major public health problem. While TB is most likely to be spread to between members of the same family, regular, close contact with colleagues at work also presents a high risk to the spread of TB.

TB is a workplace issue because health is essential not only to the well being of individuals but also the functioning of economies. For employers with TB infected staff, TB interrupts workflow, lowers productivity and raises the direct and indirect costs such as the replacement and retraining of workers. Without treatment, employees who are sick with TB will not be able to work at all. But given effective treatment, many infected employees can return to work within two to four weeks without the risk of infecting others.

The workplace is an ideal venue for workers to receive TB treatment as an alternative to attending an external health facility. The workplace is a safe and convenient location where communication systems are already in place and existing structures, services and facilities can be used for prevention, care, and support as well as to create awareness among managers and staff on a regular basis.

The garment industry of Bangladesh has been the key export division and a main source of foreign exchange for the last 25 years. The industry provides employment to about three million workers of whom 90% are women. Factories range in size from hundreds to tens of thousands of workers. Employers including those at garment factories can play a vital role in promoting and undertaking TB control activities in the workplace and in neighbouring communities.



Figure 1. Orientation Workshop for Garment factory managers and workers



Figure 2. Monitoring and supervision visit by COMDIS project managers Dr. James Newel and Dr. AN Zafar Ullah (PPPP), at a DOTS centre located within a factory

The COMDIS Response

In response to the huge opportunity that conducting TB case management at garment factories presents, COMDIS has been implementing a Public-Private Partnership Project (PPPP) project in collaboration with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter Association (BGMEA) and National Tuberculosis Control Program (NTP).

COMDIS has now completed a survey and enlisted around 170 mid size garment factories in the capital Dhaka to the programme, reaching an estimated 15 thousand people. Once enlisted, COMDIS has supported the factories to either establish or strengthen DOTS (Directly Observed Therapy Short-Course) centres within each factory building; these centres carry out the WHO-recommended treatment strategy for detection and cure of TB. COMDIS has also provided additional supplies where needed for the centres and has ensured each centre is staffed with a health worker. Through COMDIS approximately 900 TB patients have undertaken successful DOTS treatment within their factory walls to this date.

Training and Education

In order to ensure that factories have undertaken appropriate measures to prevent Tuberculosis, COMDIS and partners are conducting a basic TB Awareness Workshop for factory owners, managers, and senior staff. The aim of the training is to provide them with technical information about TB prevention and treatment and motivate them to support their workers in key aspects of TB control in the workplace. The training also focuses on providing them with evidence of the success of TB treatment in order to allay any concerns or fears.

An education programme for garment workers is also being simultaneously rolled out. This training includes a general discussion of TB that is facilitated by the use of posters, leaflets and videos – so that workers become aware of the dangers of TB but also how to prevent it and treat it. Emphasis is placed on removing the stigma of TB and empowering garment workers to seek care.

Technical training is also being provided to the DOTS centre lab technician.

Public-Private Partnership Project (PPPP) Element

Another key objective of this programme is to develop a public-private partnership model for effective involvement of Private Medical Practitioners (PMPs) and other health service providers in TB service delivery in the workplace in Bangladesh. This means that COMDIS and partners have been working to make private PMPs and other health workers aware of the programmes that are ongoing in the workplace. Once they are aware, they will start to refer patients who come to their office of the option to seek care in their own workplace, provided they are garment workers.

Supporting the National TB Control Programme of Bangladesh

COMDIS is currently in the process of developing a Tuberculosis Case Management Guidebook and a TB Treatment Algorithm for the National TB Programme of Bangladesh. These guidelines should help improve the quality of TB care in the country. There will be two guides – one directed at PMP's and the other at health service providers, for use in either a standard health clinic or hospital, or in a workplace DOTS centre setting. These guidebooks are based on research gathered in the initial stages of this project specific to the Bangladesh context, as well as COMDIS prior experience in this domain, and have already been piloted in Dhaka. They are currently being reviewed by senior Government staff in Bangladesh and are expected to be rolled out to a further two districts prior to a mass printing and dissemination throughout Bangladesh.