



# Addressing the global challenges of multimorbidity - lessons from South Africa

## Case Study

2-3 November 2016, Johannesburg, South Africa

# Multimorbidity

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## Context

As global life expectancy rises, the incidence of non-communicable diseases is also increasing, affecting millions of people each year. Together, these factors mean that suffering from more than one long-term condition, known as multimorbidity, is rapidly becoming an international health challenge.

The challenge is likely to vary between countries, where demographics, disease profiles and health services differ. There is currently much attention on social determinants of health and universal health coverage, particularly in low and middle income countries (LMICs), which are both important factors to the burden of multimorbidity.

However, currently there is no commonly used framework for defining or more widely understanding multimorbidity. Further, most health-related research is currently focused on the prevention and management of conditions in isolation. Consequently, it is difficult to compile a coherent body of research in this area or develop evidence-based strategies for use in healthcare systems.

## Workshops

Within this context, the Academy of Medical Sciences hosted two multimorbidity policy workshops, in partnership with the Academy of Sciences South Africa (ASSAf) and Inter Academy Partnership for Health (IAP) individually. These workshops considered the burden of multimorbidity in South Africa and subsequently Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS) and asked how we can achieve a more coherent and consistent approach to defining, researching and addressing multimorbidity.

The two workshops brought together over 100 experts and evidence from the BRICS, UK and other LMICs on the prevalence, burden (including cost and health impacts) and determinants of multimorbidity. Participants identified gaps in our knowledge and associated research priorities through a review of the evidence available and considered how health systems are dealing with multimorbidity by discussing key challenges and the costs and financing issues associated with multimorbidity in LMIC settings.

## Outputs

Following the two workshops, two written reports were produced and disseminated to BRICS, UK and other LMIC stakeholders with key next steps to address multimorbidity. The reports summarised some of the following key messages: specific interventions, and how to provide care for vulnerable older people with multiple health conditions.

- Multimorbidity is a growing global health challenge that affects a large proportion of the world's population.
- Multimorbidity is growing in prevalence as a result of both an epidemiological shift and demographic shift.
- Multimorbidity is more common in the elderly so it will be a particular burden in LMICs as life expectancy continues to rise.
- Multimorbidity is often associated with socioeconomic status, with those from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds are more at risk of developing multiple conditions.
- The current single-disease model is outdated and unhelpful when dealing with the increasing burden of multimorbidity.

- Policymakers worldwide need to better address health inequalities and support the complex service needs of a growing multimorbid population.
- There is a gap between the knowledge of and the ability to address the high mortality from chronic conditions, and there are difficulties in the implementation of integrated disease care.
- Mental health is central to the management of multimorbidity and should not continue to be ignored.
- Health systems should be developed so that, in addition to providing adequate treatment and management, they are better able to diagnose multimorbidity, assess its severity and monitor it.
- The patient perspective is vital and any research recommendations must reflect patient priorities.

Evidence gathered from the two workshops was also important for the Academy to inform its international working group on multimorbidity.

## Top three impacts

In addition to gathering evidence, the workshops and report are designed to act as a catalyst for future policy activities and build the capacity for our national partners in LMICs to do policy work. Hardcopies were disseminated to key stakeholders in BRICS countries. The top three impacts from these workshops include:

- ASSAf used the reports to meet with key health policy makers in South Africa to highlight the main messages. They also shared the report at events including the Science Forum South Africa in 2017 and 2018 as well as the Global Evidence Summit hosted by the University of Cape Town in 2017. The stakeholders engaged included South African Medical Research Council, Department of Science and Technology, Department of Health and World Health Organization (WHO). As a result of these meetings:
  - Relevant messages were incorporated into the ASSAf consensus study on Revitalising Health Professional Education which was published in 2018.
  - ASSAf have presented the report at the International Global Young Academy Conference, at the ASSAf Standing Committee on Health and at the Science diplomacy and gender workshops in Namibia and Botswana respectively.
- ASSAf have used the outputs and gaps identified to submit funding proposals to further assess the prevalence and burden of multimorbidities across Africa aiming to leverage funding to do further policy work in this area.
- Following the launch of the Academy's international working group report on multimorbidity, a joint implementation workshop was held with MRC, NIHR, and Wellcome Trust. The outcomes of the workshop have fed into the development of a joint funding call by the MRC and NIHR, which was announced in July 2018 and will aim to increase our understanding of the epidemiology and causes of multimorbidity in the UK. It is also the funders' ambition to develop a joint multimorbidity strategy with the aim of improving the investment in and policy relevance of multimorbidity research in the UK and global research community.

**To read the full workshop report visit:**

<https://acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/addressing-the-global-challenge-of-multimorbidity-lessons-from-south-africa> and <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/BRICS-multimorbidity>

**To learn more about our GCRF work visit:**

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