

PRESS RELEASE

Tracking Global Health Improvements with a New, Simple Method

by Françoise Makanda, Communications Officer at DLSPH

Getting a snapshot of a country's health statistics is as easy as using simple causes of death and disability surveys with open-source data. Best of all, the method is low-cost and reproducible.

Dr. Prabhat Jha, director of the Centre for Global Health Research at St. Michael's Hospital and Professor of Epidemiology at the Dalla Lana School of Public Health (DLSPH), did just that with his National Burden Estimates (NBE) method. It combines open-source data from the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), and data from his Million Death Study in India. He published the methodology in *The Lancet Global Health* journal today.

"The National Burden Estimates method is a simple way to enable every country to determine their local burden of disease, what's killing people and what's disabling them," says Dr. Jha, who is the lead investigator of India's Million Death Study.

The UN's Population Division has death counts and estimates for every country in an open dataset. The WHO's Global Health Estimates has data on the relationship between every death and how much disability occurs. In turn, the NBE method works for countries that are obtaining simple, but representative, local estimates of deaths.

With NBE, Dr. Jha and co-authors observed that death by suicide was common in southern India. Young adults are taking their lives at an alarming rate compared to the north, a finding corroborated by a previous Million Death Study paper. Other findings demonstrated that cancers were more concentrated in the north. Disability rates—also known as DALYs—in rural areas were at least twice those of urban areas for chronic respiratory disease, diarrhoea, and fevers of unknown origin.

The method offers a solution—a new GPS-type process that provides countries with a transparent path to improving health. It also allows governments to prioritize public health programming efficiently and take ownership of health statistics.

"If you can get India right, which is one-sixth of the world, you're off to a reasonable start," says Dr. Jha.

The UN's third Sustainable Development Goal seeks to advance good health and well-being, yet very few countries have the resources to meet this goal. Many countries are often too strapped for resources to measure death statistics. Many are still taking data from larger countries like the United States, a tactic Dr. Jha says can be misleading.

Jha said that he is pleased with the results he obtained with lead author Dr. Geetha Menon, a scientist at the Indian Council of Medical Research. The next [Statistical Alliance for Vital Events \(SAVE-QES\) Summer Institute](#) led by the DLSPH in June 2020 will put the method to a test. A key goal of SAVE-QES is to expand the global understanding of mortality statistics and their uses. It also aims to accelerate the introduction of novel, low-cost mortality monitoring systems and expand the use of existing mortality data systems.

Dr. Jha and SAVE-QES program co-lead, Professor Erica Di Ruggiero, will be leading a group of researchers from different countries on a week-long training collaboration at DLSPH to use the NBE

method for their host countries. Should the collaboration be successful, Dr. Jha and Dr. Di Ruggiero would like countries to use the method over time to track their progress. This is a part of an overall strategy that will allow DLSPH and St. Michael's to have greater impact on a global scale.

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