

# Pandemic proportions

Diabetes in the developing world was the focus of a recent high-profile conference in Copenhagen. **Martin Banks** reports

**T**he prevalence of diabetes is reaching “epidemic” proportions all over the world. Of this, there is no doubt. Even so, many misconceptions and myths surround this particular chronic disease. These myths, it is argued, are preventing people, including authorities and governments, from taking appropriate measures to tackle the problem. It is widely believed, for instance, that diabetes is a mild condition that does not kill. Wrong. Every ten seconds a person dies from diabetes-related causes. In 2007, diabetes is expected to result in 3.8 million deaths, or 6 per cent of world mortality – the same figure as HIV/Aids.

It is also believed that diabetes is a disease related to affluence. On the contrary, the high costs of diabetes are linked to the complications, which occur when there is no care or inadequate routine care. The cost of educating a person with diabetes to take care of their feet to prevent foot ulcers is minimal but the cost of treating a foot ulcer is considerable.

While about one million feet are amputated each year due to diabetes, an estimated 70 per cent of them could have been prevented by simple cost-effective measures.

The toll that diabetes, in particular, but other chronic diseases in general, are taking on individuals, society and economies, especially in the developing world, cannot be over-stated. This was the overwhelming message to emerge from a conference in Copenhagen on 28 August, organised by the World Diabetes Foundation (WDF) to mark its fifth anniversary. The WDF, set up in 2002, is an independent foundation dedicated to supporting prevention and treatment of diabetes in the developing world. To date, it has funded 119 projects in 70 countries.

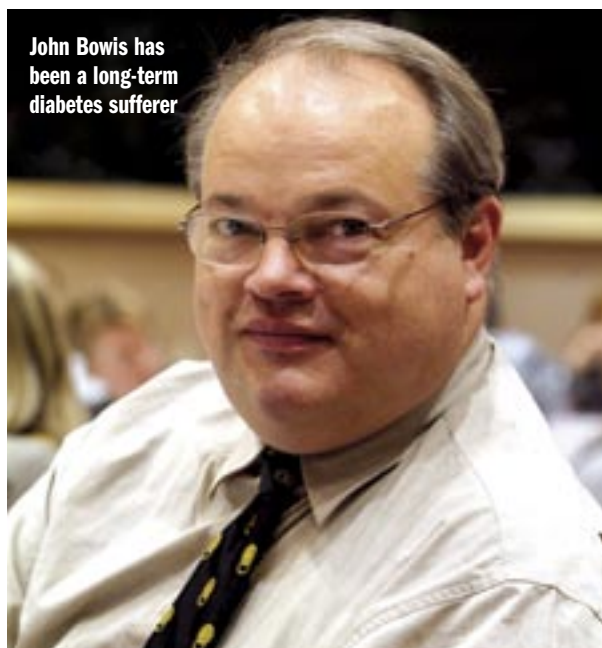
Among those attending the event in Denmark, where the WDF is based, were Ulla Tornos, Danish minister of development assistance, Pierre Lefebvre, WDF chairman, Ida Nicolaisen, of the UN’s permanent forum on indigenous issues and Martin Silink, president of the International Diabetes Foundation. A panel discussion, chaired by BBC presenter Quentin Cooper, was told that those who need more advanced

and expensive care for chronic complications are often the very people who cannot afford such care.

When burdened with these problems many of them are forced to borrow money in order to pay for treatment, the panel heard. The one-day debate, entitled ‘Strengthening Health Systems in Developing Countries,’ gave all key stakeholders an opportunity to reflect, not only on what has been achieved in the past five years of the WDF, but on what can be done in the future to help strengthen the fight against chronic disease in developing countries. As Silink pointed out, prevention and effective treatment of chronic diseases like diabetes is not costly. However, in both human and economic terms, not treating the condition is extremely costly. “When this happens, the resulting costs will stunt economic growth in the developing world and undermine the benefits of improved standards of living and education,” he said. →



**John Prescott** has already used his high profile to raise awareness of problems linked to diabetes, such as retinal abnormalities



**John Bowis has been a long-term diabetes sufferer**

The very same countries that face the huge burden of health from diabetes and other chronic diseases are also struggling to cope with issues related to maternal and child health, safe drinking water and infectious diseases. “After all, they have limited resources and manpower,” Silink said. His concerns were broadly echoed by WDF managing director, Anil Kapur, who said the world was witnessing a “pandemic” in terms of overweight and obesity, and related chronic diseases. Obesity and sedentary lifestyles are important risk factors for both diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

Once considered a problem only in wealthy countries, World Health Organisation estimates show that the prevalence of overweight and obesity are now dramatically increasing in the low and middle income countries. The WHO predicts the global diabetes population will grow to more than 200 million by the end of the decade and to 330m in 2025, with developing countries bearing the brunt of this epidemic. “Raised body mass index is a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes. Over the next ten years, the prevalence of diabetes is expected to increase most significantly in the regions of the eastern Mediterranean and Africa,” said Kapur. “What is even more disturbing is the fact that type 2 diabetes can be easily prevented by adapting a healthy lifestyle.”

Among the high profile figures who suffer from diabetes are former British deputy prime minister John Prescott and centre-right MEP John Bowis, who has called on the EU and member states to make diabetes a priority issue. “Diabetes has reached epidemic proportions and is a leading cause of reducing life expectancy by 15 years,” said Bowis, a long-time sufferer. “There is much to learn about diabetes and much to

do across Europe and beyond. I know some of the strands of the diabetes challenge. I am reminded daily of my Type 2 diabetes by my feet. Spells of dizziness and tiredness remind me that I live with diabetes. My pill box with its chunky tablets, home and hospital blood tests, regular sight and feet checks – all are part of my life.” Bowis says that one of the side effects of diabetes is stigma. “One of the ways of defeating stigma is for people in public life living with the disease to come out and say so. Many do but too many do not.”

There are many famous diabetes sufferers, including five-times Olympic gold medallist Steve Redgrave, HG Wells, Ernest Hemmingway and Jack Benny. “I tell you, it is a bit lonely out there as a politician with diabetes and only them for company,” said Bowis.

There are two types of diabetes, which is a hormone disorder that can cause problems with the kidneys, legs and feet, eyes, heart, nerves and blood flow. It usually appears in people over the age of 45 who are overweight. Prescott, now a member of the Council of Europe, suffers from the milder, non-insulin dependent, type 2 diabetes. The WDF says it would welcome any input that sufferers like Bowis and Prescott, now that he is on the European stage, could make to its ongoing campaign.

This should receive a further boost on November 14, which has been designated World Diabetes Day. As WDF spokesman Jamal Butt pointed out, the campaign specifically focuses on how big business can devote more financial support to “spur” private and public partnerships with donor organisations in developing countries. “It is often something which people do not seem particularly willing to talk about,” he said. “But, given the numbers of people affected by diabetes, I hope this is going to change.” ★

### Diabetes factfile

- In the UK, 1.8m people are diagnosed with diabetes and up to another million almost certainly live unknowingly with the disease
- One in 20 over 65 and one in five over 85 have diabetes
- Those with an African or Caribbean background are three times more likely to have it
- Those from South Asian backgrounds are six times more likely to have diabetes
- Type 1 reduces life expectancy by 20 years, Type 2 by 10;
- Sufferers are five times more susceptible to heart disease and three times to stroke;
- Type 2 costs the individual €1,150 per year, excluding the cost of lost earnings and lost tax revenue on those earnings
- The WHO predicts the number of sufferers worldwide will double over 25 years to 300 million