

# HYPERTENSION: IGNORANCE IS NOT A BLESSING

**Muhammad Usman**

Department of Medicine, Gomal Medical College, D.I.Khan, Pakistan

National Health Survey of Pakistan (NHSP) 1990-94 reported that 17.9% of adults had hypertension and only 3% of these were controlled.<sup>1</sup> Hypertension, also called silent killer, is a well established risk factor for coronary artery disease. Its increasing prevalence is therefore of great concern. In the year 2001 hypertension was the most common primary diagnosis made by the office based physicians in USA<sup>2</sup> and it has been estimated to cause 4.5% of the current global disease burden,<sup>3</sup> affecting approximately a billion individuals worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore the worldwide figures for adults with hypertension are predicted to rise by about 60% by the year 2025.<sup>5</sup>

The association between high blood pressure and cardiovascular morbidity and mortality is well documented.<sup>6,7</sup> Hypertensive individuals as compared to their normotensive counterparts over the age of 65 are two to three times more likely to develop coronary artery disease.<sup>8</sup> Similarly for individuals aged 40-70, each 20/10 mmHg rise in blood pressure above 115/75 mmHg doubles the risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>4,6</sup>

It is also a well known fact that most of the hypertensive individuals are unaware of their high blood pressure. This is not only the case with our society but even in developed countries. Out of 50 million adult hypertensive individuals in USA 30% are unaware of their high blood pressure.<sup>9</sup>

This lack of awareness has many reasons. Hypertension by itself has no specific symptoms and thus patients present late only when they develop complications. Common man in our society, because of illiteracy does not understand the importance of routine check on his blood pressure. He does not have enough knowledge of the health care delivery system to seek help in proper time. Few people are diagnosed during routine medical check-up for employment but as jobs are limited so fewer patients are discovered in this manner. Also many private employment sources do not have a system for routine pre-employment medical examination.

Another important factor that individuals are unaware of their high blood pressure is that they have not been properly educated by the primary care providers regarding the dangers of high blood pressure and the importance of its routine checkup.

Moreover, the definition of hypertension has changed with time but in many areas the old criteria for its diagnosis are followed leaving many of the patients undiagnosed.

In short, physicians and the community both have responsibility to disseminate awareness regarding the asymptomatic nature of hypertension at least in its early stages and the importance to recognize and treat it early to minimize the risk of coronary vascular disease and its complications.

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