

Verbal Autopsy: Understanding underlying causes of Tuberculosis mortality

Having committed to eliminating TB by 2025 and removing the label of the highest global burden of TB, India is working on promotive, preventive, curative, and rehabilitative TB care services. Preventing TB related deaths is a big challenge in TB elimination. The numbers remain high despite reduction in India's contribution towards global mortality (from 36% in 2021 to 26% in 2022¹). In this context, information on TB mortality has a crucial role to play in seeking deeper insights into knowing the cause of death and managing TB.

Verbal autopsy of deaths, is a method of eliciting information from the family members, care givers about demographic, socio-economic co-morbid conditions and events preceding deaths so that the likely cause of death can be established. This technique of establishing the cause of death is useful in settings, where medical certification of deaths is deficient.

The National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme (NTEP) mandates an in-depth verbal autopsy of deaths among TB patients to understand the cause of death and use this knowledge to make necessary adjustments to facilitate the program and optimize service delivery mechanisms for preventing avoidable deaths. In addition, the programme also aims to identify the reasons for early death.

1. Global TB Report 2023, World Health Organisation.

STRENGTHENING HEALTH SYSTEMS

Under the Closing the Gaps in TB Care Cascade project, World Health Partners (WHP) has piloted verbal autopsy in the intervention geographies of Gujarat and Jharkhand. Since April 1, 2023, a total of 103 verbal autopsies have been conducted in Gujarat out of the reported 255 TB deaths, and in Jharkhand, 62 verbal autopsies have been conducted out of the total 151 TB deaths reported in the Nikshay web portal, using necessary tools (Population Health Metrics Research Consortium or PHMRC) prepared in consultation with CTD and WHO.

To ensure this activity continues further and is scaled up, WHP, with State NTEP support, has conducted cascade training and trained 268 health staff in Gujarat and 160 in Jharkhand on areas like approaches for conducting verbal autopsy, its step-by-step process flow in addition to covering topics like TB mortality trends, analysis of TB death data and identification of the target audience. A pre-test was administered to assess participants' knowledge regarding TB deaths before commencing the training. This activity will strengthen the verbal autopsy component under NTEP and help conduct gap analysis across the entire TB care cascade.



Left: World Health Partners (WHP) team speaking to family members of TB patients, who died during the treatment process in Jharkhand. **Right:** Data is being entered in a mobile application specifically developed by WHP for Verbal Autopsy.

World Health Partners (WHP) is a non-profit Indian society that sets up programs to bring sustainable healthcare within easy access to underserved and vulnerable communities. It innovatively harnesses already available resources more efficiently by using evidence-based management and technological solutions. WHP is best known for its programs focused on early detection and treatment of tuberculosis in urban and rural settings supported by community-based activities to ensure prevention. The organization uses all available resources--both in the public and private sectors to ensure that people living in any part of the country will have access to high-quality treatment.

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