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Chronic Diseases Are Major Health Threats in Latin America

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“Chronic diseases are the cause of most deaths among our populations and those are diseases we can prevent. That is the big challenge,” Carina Vance said in Washington, where she taking part in a meeting of the Pan American Health Organization's board.

Vance announced at the forum that Ecuador has become, after Colombia, the second country to eradicate onchocerciasis, known as river blindness, a disease the country has been combating for more than 30 years with assistance from organizations such as PAHO.

The next battle, she said, is to eradicate malaria, a disease whose incidence has been decreasing in Latin America but still has an impact in the population.

Vance highlighted the international community's commitment to eradicate so-called poverty diseases, such as dengue fever, and infectious diseases, including AIDS, that cause more than 1 million deaths each year.

However, she said, in Latin America “the diseases causing more deaths and disabilities are, without any doubt, chronic illnesses like diabetes, hypertension and cancer.”

Over the past 10 years diabetes has become the main cause of death in Ecuador, a development related to lifestyle.

“Currently a big challenge are non-infectious diseases related to social behavior, and the ability of the government to provide the means to make information accessible to the population and to

implement other strategies,” she said.

Ecuador is considering taxing “unhealthy consumption,” something already tried in Mexico, which levied extra taxes on sugary drinks in response to data showing that 30 percent of children are overweight.

“There is an important role for the government to play, but there is a role also for the population that is important,” Vance said. “The difficulty is to achieve those changes in behavior when we are swamped by ad campaigns for foods without any nutritional value but that contribute to high levels of fat, salt and sugar in the diet.”

Ecuador has also implemented a system of color-coded labels on food products and educational campaigns, and the country hopes this PAHO meeting will approve a resolution to fight obesity and another promoting universal access to health care.

“Latin America must be a region where health care moves from being a privilege for the few who have money to buy a service to a region where health care is a fundamental and basic right for all,” she said.

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