

Guideline Based Rheumatic Heart Disease Prevention and Control Program IV (PrevRHD IV) Launch Event

Mekelle, Ethiopia – September 28, 2025 – The Guideline Based Rheumatic Heart Disease Prevention and Control Program IV (PrevRHD IV) has been officially launched in Tigray region to be conducted in Mekelle zone and surrounding towns of Tigray, at Planet Hotel, Mekelle, Ethiopia.

This significant initiative of community intervention aimed at primary and secondary prevention of tonsillitis, Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease (ARF/RHD) has been ongoing since 2017 before it was stopped due to COVID -19 pandemic and then the war on Tigray. The general objective of the PrevRHD IV program is to reduce the burden of RHD through a comprehensive approach that includes awareness creation, by teaching all level health professionals, patients living with rheumatic heart disease and school teachers and students and community in general.

Today's event brought together the main stakeholders and/or program owners including the Tigray Regional Health Bureau (TRHB) leaders and healthcare professionals, The Tigray Regional Education Bureau (TREB) and teachers, the Tigray Heart Association (THA) and other stakeholders dedicated to addressing this critical public health challenge in Ethiopia. The launch commenced with registration conducted by the PrevRHD team. The event started with introduction of the schedule by Mr. Fikre Abraha, the PrevRHD IV Coordinator, and featured a series of presentations and discussions from esteemed healthcare professionals and representatives from key organizations.

Dr. Abraha Hailu, the Local Program Principal Investigator, warmly welcomed all participants, particularly acknowledging the representatives from the Tigray Regional Health Bureau, the Tigray Regional Education Bureau, and Mekelle University-College of Health Sciences. He expressed special gratitude to Etiopia witten organization /GIZ/Clinic Partnershaften and all particularly to those from Etiopia witten who have been closely working in the PrevRHD program since 2016 (Drs Dr. G.Wehr, DR Ahmedin Idris and Dr Christian Leuner). Dr. Abraha also emphasized the importance of integrating the prevention

of tonsillitis and ARF/RHD into the elementary and high school educational curriculum, and called up on the education sector to look in to this gap and address it.

He also stated that it is essential for all healthcare professionals to be well-versed in the prevention and management of Rheumatic Heart Disease. He urged TRHB to prioritize the work on availability and distribution of Benzathine Penicillin G, the most important drug used in the prevention of RHD and to introduce the alternative oral penicillin V to the country as per the World Health Organization and national recommendation of prevention of RHD. He reinforced the need for collaboration among all stakeholders, saying, "We must work together to achieve our common goals."

Following this, Dr. Tewodros Gobeza, a representative from TRHB and Head of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), addressed the audience and opened the program officially. He spoke about the growing burden of NCDs in the nation and region, stating, "non-communicable diseases are 80% preventable with the right strategies and community involvement. The PrevRHD program is a crucial step toward addressing these health challenges in Tigray and is 100% potentially preventable." He assured participants of TRHB's commitment to working collaboratively with the PrevRHD team to implement effective prevention measures.

Dr. Abraha Gebregziabher, the Chief Clinical Director of MU-CHS Ayder Comprehensive Specialized Hospital, made an opening speech next. He thanked all invited guests from stakeholders and participants for coming and to those who made this program happen and resume again. He said he liked Dr. Abraha Hailu's RHD booklet in Tigrigna, stating, "I read the booklet in Tigrigna, which is a remarkable writing that includes all about RHD, prevention, and control. He raised the importance of all levels of prevention to tackle ARF/RHD burden stating what can be done at the levels of Primordial prevention, Primary Prevention, Secondary Prevention and Tertiary Prevention.

He assured the audience that MU-CHS is committed to working alongside all stakeholders of this program for this vital initiative. W/ro Silas Araya, a representative from TREB, emphasized the essential role of teachers in shaping perceptions and behaviors within the community. "Teachers are the most influential persons to change the perceptions and behaviors regarding health issues among others," she stated. She expressed TREB's

commitment to changing the negative perceptions and misunderstandings about the relationship of the sore throat and the heart/ARF/RHD.

Following the opening remarks, the first presentation titled "The Burden of Rheumatic Heart Disease: Current and Previous PrevRHD Programs" was delivered by Dr. Abraha Hailu, moderated by Dr. Tesfay G. He highlighted the significant impact of RHD on the community and discussed the successes and challenges of previous PrevRHD initiatives, calling for renewed efforts and innovative strategies to enhance program effectiveness.

Next, Dr. Alemseged B presented on "Tonsillopharyngitis and Acute Rheumatic Fever," moderated by Dr. Hagazi T. He explained the epidemiology, symptoms, and treatment options for these conditions, underscoring the importance of early diagnosis and treatment to reduce the incidence of tonsillitis, Acute Rheumatic Fever and hence the future burden of RHD. After a brief tea break, Dr. Kibreab G presented on "Tertiary Prevention of RHD: Complications and Management," also moderated by Dr. Hagazi T. He discussed the complications associated with RHD (Heart Failure, Atrial Fibrillation, Infective endocarditis, Pregnancy and RHD), Stroke among others) and emphasized the need for comprehensive management plans for affected individuals, highlighting the importance of establishing cardiac surgery set up in the region as part of tertiary prevention of RHD, follow-up care and community support systems in improving patient outcomes.

The program concluded with a panel discussion featuring Dr. Abraha H, Dr. Alemseged, Dr. Tedros H, Dr. Hagazi T and Dr. Kibreab G, moderated by Dr. Tesfay G. The panelists engaged in a robust dialogue, addressing questions from the audience and sharing their insights on collaborative efforts to combat RHD and improve healthcare delivery in Tigray. Dr. Abraha G also responded to the questions raised during the panel discussion and reaffirming the collective commitment to the initiative and He emphasized that "all stakeholders should work together".

The event wrapped up with closing remarks from a representative of TRHB, who emphasized the significance and impact of the PrevRHD program in preventing non-communicable diseases. The program adjourned with a lunch break providing an opportunity for further networking and collaboration. Finally future focal/contact persons for the program implementation with in each sectors of the stakeholders of the

health (Primary hospitals, Health Centers) and the education sector's contacts were taken by the PrevRHD team.