

The Union

Media release: For immediate release

COVID-19 in focus on World TB Day (Tuesday 24 March)

The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Diseases (The Union) stands in solidarity and with resilience in the fight against two airborne diseases: TB and COVID-19

Monday, 23 March, 2020 (Paris, France) -- A multi-stakeholder approach to infectious disease control based on a partnership between government, the private sector, the research sector and affected community is essential if the COVID-19 virus is to be defeated, said The Union today ahead of World TB Day tomorrow, Tuesday 24 March. The Union also recognised that people living with tuberculosis (TB) are likely to be more vulnerable to COVID-19 and its effects and reiterated that it is essential to ensure that access to TB prevention, diagnosis and treatment continue in what is an unsettling environment.

“We know what works to fight COVID-19 from our experience and the tools we have developed to end TB: infection control, wide-spread testing, contact tracing, X-rays, artificial intelligence, telemedicine and psycho-social support,” said **José Luis Castro**, Executive Director of The Union. “Today, prevention of any disease requires in the first instance, political will – and prevention remains the biggest tool we have to address COVID-19.

“Years of under-investment in supporting health systems in the TB response made TB and its drug resistant forms the biggest infectious disease killer with over 4000 deaths per day. We can’t afford to repeat these mistakes and be unprepared for pandemics like COVID-19.”

TB is now the largest infectious disease killer in the world. Some 1.5 million people die each year of TB and the number of people who develop TB disease each year — approximately 10 million — has been relatively static for decades. Today, TB disease overwhelmingly affects low- and middle-income countries, where widespread poverty, a lack of access to medical care and few public health interventions allow the disease to spread in crowded living conditions.

There is growing concern in the global health community of the potential impact of COVID-19 in some countries in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia whose healthcare systems will struggle to cope with the effects of the new virus and that people affected by TB, HIV and other infectious diseases as well as prisoners, migrants, and people living in poverty, will be at greater risk of reduced access to health care.

“It is so important to put vulnerable people first in the fight against COVID-19,” said **Claire Forlani**, film and television actor and Ambassador for The Union. “We have learnt from many TB survivors who have gone through the isolation, fear, discrimination and stigma that we are facing with COVID-19. Let’s not repeat this, let’s learn from it. We all need each other. Now is the time for collaboration and sharing any practical lessons from fighting TB that we can.”

“The importance of collaboration in research and development is also critical,” said **Professor Kevin Mortimer**, Director of Lung Health at The Union. “We need knowledge, resource sharing and pooling of information to maximise our ability to deliver effective care for everyone in need and develop new innovations, including a vaccine.

“It’s extremely important that we don’t stop here or allow ourselves to only value these systems during an outbreak – we need to maintain these principles of collaboration more broadly so that we can tackle other real and present threats to human health and to be one step ahead of future emergencies.”

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Further Information:

Michael Kessler
Michael Kessler Media
The Union Media Relations
Mob: +34 655 792 699
Email: michael.kessler@inton-media.com

About the [International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease](#) (The Union)

The Union was founded in 1920 and is the world’s first global health organisation. We are a global leader in ending TB, we fight the tobacco industry, and we solve key problems in treating major diseases. We use science to design the best treatments and policies for the most pressing public health challenges affecting people living in poverty around the world. The Union’s members, staff and consultants operate in more than 140 countries and embody our core values of accountability, independence, quality and solidarity.

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