

# Health Day Commemorations 2021: Preening or Prudent?

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## Abstract

Similar to many social events of life, diseases and health-related practices are celebrated annually with titles like World Health Day, World Tuberculosis Day. In this article, we dig into the rationale of these events and highlight a few days that are commemorated between March and May. The history of World Tuberculosis Day is touched upon, along with a discussion of this year's theme: "The Clock is Ticking" which is a reminder to make good on multiple promises made by global leaders to end tuberculosis. For World Hypertension Day, the emphasis is on proper measurement of blood pressure, with a focus on the correct use of automated machines. The different themes of World Malaria Day are enumerated, which are often repeated for successive years. Although the diseases being spotlighted vary widely in epidemiology, a common link can be seen. Each day shows a specific target with specific interventions. This platform created by the celebration is used to spread awareness and correct knowledge among people so that timely steps can be taken to reduce the burden of disease on the people.

**Keywords:** World Health Day, World Tuberculosis Day, World Hypertension Day, World Malaria Day, WHO, knowledge, attitude, practices

## Introduction

Each day has 24 hours, yet Sunday is looked forward to as the "day of rest". A mother's love is perennial yet only the first Sunday of May is celebrated as Mother's Day. We choose to keep our social circle limited as per our comfort, yet the number of calls, messages and meetings that we receive on our birthday seems nothing short of an epidemic. So why? What gives these days that X factor which makes most of the world put focus on them? Is it just a sham, an excuse to show fake concern and appreciation? Is it an opportunity for people to make contact out of the blue when all year long they didn't care enough to try

or were too apprehensive to? No matter what the intention, we definitely get the attention. The progress of the science and art of healthcare has hundreds of milestones. While many of them are celebrated within their field, bringing them into the public eye is the approach by more and more medical organizations. A letter by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek to the Royal Society in London, reporting the first description of a single-celled organism on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1683 is now celebrated as International Microorganism Day<sup>[1]</sup>. Since the first celebration in 1950, 7<sup>th</sup> April is celebrated as World Health Day every year as the 'birthday' of the World Health Organization (WHO).<sup>[2]</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> March is celebrated as World Tuberculosis Day since 1984. This was the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day on which Dr. Robert Koch announced that he had discovered the bacterium that causes tuberculosis.<sup>[3]</sup> Now that we have scanned through the smear, it is time to switch to our high-power lens and examine some events in greater detail.

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## World Tuberculosis Day

Tuberculosis is endemic to India with an estimate of 5.05 per thousand.<sup>[4]</sup> A chronic killer, it spreads to a variety of organs with effects including but not limited to persistent cough, intestinal adhesions, infertility, paraplegia and lung fibrosis. In this COVID-19 pandemic, there were hopes that the lockdown, social distancing and use of masks would cause a concurrent reduction in transmission of tuberculosis as well. However, it is estimated that a 3-month suspension of TB services followed by a 10-month time period to return to full functioning and after considering a 50% reduction in the transmission of tuberculosis due to the lockdown-related disruptions, an additional 1.19 million cases will occur in India over the next five years.<sup>[5]</sup> The apt theme for this year, “The Clock is Ticking” conveys the sense that the world is running out of time to act on the commitments to end TB made by global leaders.<sup>[3]</sup> The itemized list of targets with figures seems to be a rainbow in the sky, only time will tell the tangible truth. The Prime Minister of India had stated in 2018 that India has set a target for the complete elimination of tuberculosis by 2025, five years ahead of the global target of 2030.<sup>[6]</sup> In this case, the day is less of a celebration and more of an alarm clock, conveying this simple message but carrying the weight of responsibility of the commitments that it reminds of.

## World Hypertension Day

World Hypertension Day is a more recent addition to this party, with the launch in 2005. May 17<sup>th</sup> is the selected date, with the theme for 2021 being “Measure Your Blood Pressure Accurately, Control It, Live Longer”, focusing on combatting low awareness rates worldwide, especially in low to middle-income areas, and accurate blood pressure measurement methods.<sup>[7]</sup> The issue of awareness dates back to the early 1970s, where the “rule of halves” was explained.<sup>[8]</sup> Figure 1 is a visual representation of the same. It shows that around half the hypertensive subjects are not aware of their diagnosis, only half of those diagnosed are taking treatment and out of those on treatment only half have adequate control of hypertension.

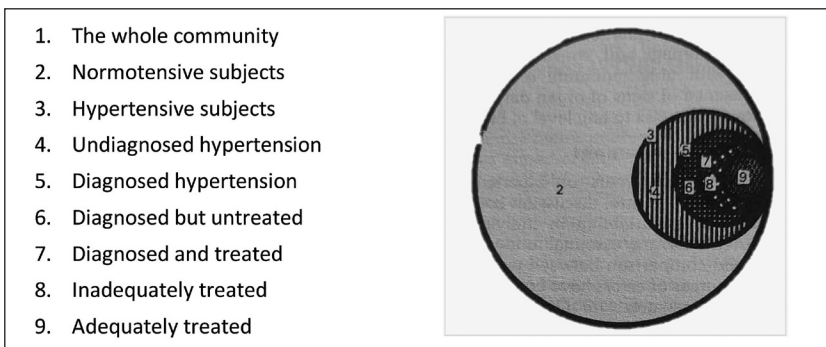


Figure 1: Hypertension in the Community

This theme is to emphasize the importance of blood pressure measurement. Some new resources include a free online course on accurate automated blood pressure measurement offered by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and guidelines for checking the accuracy of BP monitors in 16 languages.<sup>[7]</sup> They say, “Modern Problems require Modern Solutions”. However, even age-old issues of ignorance and neglect can be tackled with novel ideas and interventions. This approach has even more utility in the COVID-19 pandemic as many hypertensive people choose not to visit clinics for their routine appointments due to fear of contracting the disease. Proper training in using automated machines will help pick up dangerous changes in blood pressure early from the safety of the home itself.

## World Malaria Day

Formerly Africa Malaria Day, it is an international observance commemorated every year on 25<sup>th</sup> April since 2007, which recognizes global efforts to control malaria. The themes over the years have been as follows<sup>[9]</sup>

- 2019-21 - Zero Malaria Starts with Me
- 2018 - Ready to beat Malaria
- 2017 - Lets Close the Gap
- 2016 - End Malaria for Good
- 2013-15 - Invest in the Future, Defeat Malaria
- 2012 - Sustain Gains, Save Lives – Invest in Malaria
- 2011 - Achieving Progress and Impact
- 2009-10 - Counting Malaria Out
- 2008 - Malaria, a Disease without Borders

Dr. Pedro Alonso, Director of WHO Global Malaria Program,<sup>[10]</sup> has referred to malaria as a poverty-related disease. The elimination of malaria is the need of the hour by interrupting the transmission of malaria. This can only be done by structured programs, political support and people’s participation.

## Conclusion

Celebration of these health-related days hence is to create awareness about different aspects of healthcare and the existing infrastruc-

ture. Proper training and support are added with the intention of equipping healthcare workers to provide better services. Celebration of the same is used as a platform to spread awareness among the general population about important diseases as well as health-related events like blood donation and breastfeeding. Focus is given to diseases like hypertension and tuberculosis as there are multiple interventions that can be taken to prevent the complications of the disease and prevent the spread to other members of the community. Better funded programs may seem flashy or over-the-top but sometimes that is precisely what is needed to catch the attention of the people. Every year, the tabloids give a multiple page write-up on a Bollywood actor's birthday but poor Dr. Koch has to settle for whatever recognition the health care fraternity is able to provide. These days are not celebrated for boosting the egos of the stalwarts who have shaped the healthcare system, nor are these days just floating fliers filled with the work done by respective organizations put up on display. They are annual events which, when implemented correctly, bridge the 'KAP-Gap' - Knowledge, Attitude and Practices – among the people.

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