

More than a bothersome problem: Dengue fever in Fiji

Clinical (suspected) cases of dengue fever reported to medical authorities in Fiji have reached 11,359 since October 2013, and patient numbers are projected to increase further week-on-week for the foreseeable future, making this current national outbreak the worst recorded incidence of dengue since 1975. Sadly, the epidemic has so far claimed 12 lives.

Mosquitoes are better known as carriers (vectors) of the deadly virus, malaria; the risks associated with dengue, another mosquito-borne viral infection, are often overlooked therefore.



Unlike malaria, dengue is spread primarily by the *Aedes* mosquito, a black-and-white striped mosquito that bites during the day, especially in the early morning and during the evening periods. Over 40% of the world's population live in dengue-endemic countries, and the WHO estimates that between 50-100 million people are infected with dengue annually.

Most cases of the disease are mild, causing flu-like symptoms and discomfort only; however, severe dengue (dengue haemorrhagic fever), resulting in plasma leakage, internal bleeding and low blood pressure (shock), can be fatal, and young children are especially susceptible. Global estimates indicate that there are about 22,000 dengue fatalities each year.

Dengue is a recent phenomenon, only emerging as a global issue since the 1950s - an appearance that coincides with the global trend of urbanisation. No coincidence. *Aedes* mosquitoes prefer the company of people, as a food source, and because we obligingly leave artificial containers lying around. Water-filled plant pots, paint tins, discarded plastic containers and old tyres make excellent stagnant, egg-hatching habitats, and as a result, today the *Aedes* mosquito naturally resides in urban areas within the tropics and sub-tropics, in close proximity to humans.

The dengue outbreak in Fiji demonstrates this urban orientation. Clusters of dengue cases have been reported in all the main Fijian towns: Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Sigatoka and Rakiraki, with the highest incidence of the disease in the most-populated central division of the main island, Viti Levu, notably in Suva.

Medical centres in the capital have been inundated with suspected cases. Blood supplies are running low throughout the country, and annual leave for all doctors and nurses has been cancelled in response to the crisis. The Ministry of Health has also initiated a national clean-up campaign, launched on 10th March, with the aim of eradicating mosquito-breeding grounds and raising community awareness of the water-borne disease. The campaign will run for 4 weeks.

News has spread of the outbreak, and overseas aid pledged. The Australian Government has committed \$750,000 (£420,000) to help treat patients and sustain the clean-up campaign.



Presently there is no known medical cure for dengue, only bed-rest and rehydration - though many sufferers are embracing a natural remedy: papaya (pawpaw)-leaf juice. A fresh papaya leaf, pounded and squeezed, will produce about a teaspoon of green juice. One to two teaspoons (one or two crushed, squeezed leaves) of the bitter liquid dissolved in water and then drunk is said to noticeably increase platelet counts and reduce fever. Apparently, very ill patients have made remarkable recoveries within days with a daily dose of papaya-leaf juice.

As new cases of dengue are forecast to increase over the coming months, and with no known medical treatment on offer - and pawpaw leaves so readily available in the tropics - such alternative medicine may be just the tonic that's needed to help reduce the effects of dengue in Fiji, and elsewhere.

Prayer Points:

- Pray for greater awareness of the disease, dengue fever, and for all who fall victim to the virus worldwide.
- Pray for the Ministry of Health in Fiji and for the success of its clean-up campaign in affected areas.
- Pray for the support of individuals, families and communities in raising awareness, and responding to the clean-up call.
- Pray for all medical professionals, who tirelessly work on through outbreaks of disease and unrest worldwide.
- Give thanks for alternative (traditional) knowledge, and pray that we learn to share such knowledge for the benefit of all peoples everywhere.

