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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Congo virus 2013: Another public health failure in Pakistan?



KEYWORDS

Congo virus;
Deaths;
Government

Dear Editor,

In the last few years, Pakistan has been experiencing its worst public health crisis in history. Failure to curtail the polio endemic allowed it to spread to other countries only a few days after the country's worst ever dengue outbreak had subsided. Matters have been further complicated as Pakistan is battling another major potential disease outbreak in the form of Crimean Congo Hemorrhagic Fever (CCHF). CCHF, more commonly known as Congo virus, became analogous to Pakistan when the first case was reported in 1976 and became endemic in 2000 [1]. The normal trend of CCHF was defied this year as the country reported the highest number of CCHF positive cases in history.

From 1 January 2013 to mid-June, 2013 only 16 cases of the disease were reported, with six deaths [1]. The death of four brothers in Khyber Pukthunkhawa, all butchers by profession, on 7 September 2013, marked the beginning of an exponential rise of the virus [2]. In 2012, there were 62 cases, while in 2013 thus far, there have been 77 positive cases and 18 deaths throughout the country [3,4]. The majority of these cases were in people with a history of contact with animals or animal skins [3].

As in the past, the Baluchistan and Khyber Pukthunkhawa provinces have again been the epicenters of this year's rise in cases of CCHF, reporting the highest number of cases in the country [5]. However, new geographical expansions of the virus to

previously virus free regions and the non-seasonal variation in CCHF cases are two major concerns this year and for the future. Positive cases were reported in Azad Jammu Kashmir and Islamabad for the first time [3]. This situation was worsened by the transport of livestock, which carried the virus, from rural areas to urban cities during the Islamic event Eid-ul-Azha; five deaths occurred during this time period alone [6].

Although the government fails to acknowledge any reason for such an outbreak this year, nongovernmental health personnel blame the outbreak on the transport of infected livestock from Afghanistan to Baluchistan and Khyber Pukthunkhawa and consider those areas to be a reservoir for the virus [7]. After the 2006 outbreak, health authorities successfully monitored livestock vaccination; however, that campaign began to be neglected a few years ago. On the other hand, the butchers association denies the presence of Congo virus in Pakistan to avoid accountability [7]. A lack of awareness campaigns has further intensified this condition over the years.

Measures to counter the virus have been taken by government authorities this year. Mobilizing the veterinary teams to spray all animals and beginning awareness campaigns, especially among doctors, are some of the efforts being made. But, as has always been the case, these measures are being taken "after" the disease has already spread, indicating the failure of Pakistan's health system. Much work needs to be done to prevent such dangerous outbreaks, especially in new areas, in the future. Government authorities should take full responsibility and work to greatly improve their failed health system.

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Competing interests

None declared.

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