

Ebola Warrants Media Attention but 'Regular' Epidemics of Tropical Infectious Diseases Deserve Coverage Too!

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Article Information

Received date: Aug 28, 2019

Accepted date: Sep 06, 2019

Published date: Sep 09, 2019

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Keywords Infectious disease; Ebola; Dengue; Malaria; Zika; Epidemic; Pandemic; Vector-borne; Water-borne; Food-borne

Article DOI 10.36876/smtmj.1019

Dear Editor,

Infectious disease pandemics cause concern and captivate the imagination in equal measure. Public fear of the unexpected, unknown and seemingly uncontrollable is fostered by news agencies and social media as well as exploited by film and television dramas [1,2]. In Western culture there is a compelling narrative that surrounds our morbid fascination with the major global disease outbreaks of the past century, from Spanish flu in 1918 to Zika in 2015 [3]. However, in truth the public health threat posed by the likes of SARS, swine flu and Ebola, to name but three pandemics of recent times, pales in comparison to the toll on human life extracted by continual epidemics of other infectious diseases caused by pathogens that have emerged over human history and with which we have come to uneasily co-exist [4-7]. Malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, HIV/AIDS and, increasingly, dengue [8], pose major risks to global health and wellbeing, particularly to people in developing nations within tropical zones of the world.

The disparity in coverage between the lay press and the well-informed and more critical academic literature is highlighted by the arguably disproportionate attention afforded by the former on the recent and current outbreaks in Central and West Africa of Ebola [9-11], a haemorrhagic febrile viral infection that carries a high mortality rate but which is actually not very contagious (hence, cases are few but most are fatal) [12,13]. Such unbalanced news reporting and social media attention bias [14-16], has the potential to spread irrational panic among geographically distant communities that are extremely unlikely to be affected, both now and in the foreseeable future [16]. For distinctly different reasons of epidemiological detail, the same could be said of the Zika outbreak in Latin America a couple of years ago [17], a similar 'fear factor' likewise propagated globally by misinformation.

By comparison to the 'hot' health crisis of Ebola [18], more 'run of the mill' (mosquito-, water- and food-borne) infectious diseases do not grab the headlines yet overall cause far more morbidity and mortality [19-21]. These are set to have an ever-greater effect in future due to the escalating rate of climate change impacting on an increasing population living in at-risk areas [22-25]. A prime example of this relative neglect by the Western media is the far less mentioned ongoing dengue outbreaks in the poor resource settings of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Philippines that in 2019 are breaking national records for incidence [26-28]. This ongoing public health challenge brings into sharp relief the inadequacy of suitable health care provision in these low-income countries to deal with an epidemic on this scale [29,30].

Regards,

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ISSN: 2573-363X

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