

An Evolving Malaria Epidemic in Kenya: A Regional Alert

Sir,

Malaria has for a long time been a killer disease worldwide and presents a major health challenge in sub-Saharan Africa.^[1] Kenya has witnessed declining malaria prevalence from 11% in 2010 to 8% in 2015 with indications that this could decline further.^[2] This commendable progress has been shuttered by recent reports of new and severe malaria epidemic in September–October 2017 that started in five counties and has quickly spread to 10 counties within semi-arid regions of Kenya. These are Marsabit, Baringo, Samburu, West Pokot, Turkana in the northwestern region; Mandera, Isiolo, Wajir in the northern region; and Lamu and Tana River in the coastal region of the country.

The evolving epidemic has resulted in a crippling health crisis never witnessed before in the counties. Already, over 50 deaths have been reported, 400 hospitalized, and more than 2000 both adults and children diagnosed with the disease. Three counties are worst hit. In Marsabit, at least 26 recorded dead while 1300 have been diagnosed with the disease. The disease has claimed nine lives in Baringo where nine villages are severely affected. In Turkana, the worst affected areas include Kakuma refugee camp where 438 people have tested positive. The situation is likely to worsen in the coming months due to the following reasons. One, the affected regions are expected to experience short rains which will lead to creation of more breeding sites for the malaria vectors and enhance transmission.^[3] Two, the disease is ravaging areas and regions traditionally not associated with the disease, and naturally, populations affected have no immunity against malaria. Therefore, all age groups are equally very vulnerable to the killer disease.^[4] Third, the situation will be more complicated by the reported resistance of local malaria parasite to available drugs.^[5] Fourth, the epidemic is happening at the time of a serious crisis in the health sector due to ongoing industrial action that started early in the year 2017. Further, the traditionally pastoral communities in the affected counties and movement of refugees are likely to enhance cross-border spread of the epidemic to neighboring counties as well as neighboring Uganda, Ethiopia and Somalia.

To conclude, the current malaria situation should not be allowed to continue. Malaria is a treatable and preventable disease that should not be killing people in the modern world. The national and county governments should recognize the changing patterns of malaria transmission occasioned by both climate and human factors and must rethink and come up with more effective malaria policy and

strategy to fight the epidemic. The international community together with government should immediately role out of drastic, elaborate, and sustainable interventions in the affected and neighboring counties to stem the epidemic in the region and beyond.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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