

Good News Project, Inc.

May 25, 2017

Information on Zika and other health concerns for 2018 Good News Project Volunteers

We have all heard about the recent epidemic of Zika infections in the Western Hemisphere. Beginning in Brazil in the last few months of 2015, it spread with astonishing speed to involve people in 70 countries in less than two years. Based on early information about Zika, the GNP Board of Directors decided in June, 2016, NOT to send volunteers to the Caribbean in 2017.

The first evidence of Zika was a sudden increase in the number of babies born with severe brain damage and very small skulls. Public health experts soon realized this was due to a virus carried by mosquitoes, first infecting the pregnant mother, and then being passed to the fetus. Within a few months, we learned that Zika also caused problems in adults – mainly neurological problems, including a paralytic syndrome called Guillain Barre' Syndrome (GBS). In the past year, we have learned that Zika can be transmitted from person to person by sexual activity, although mosquito transmission is the most common source of infection.

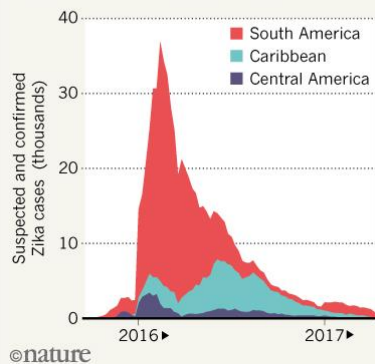
In recent months, there is new information about the relationship of cardiac arrhythmias to the viruses in the Caribbean. A Mayo Clinic researcher working with the Tropical Medicine Institute in Caracas, Venezuela, described nine adult patients who had serious cardiac arrhythmias and heart failure with Zika infections. Her research may be the, "canary in the coal mine" that alerts physicians about this connection. Arrhythmias are quite common, and prior to this, a doctor in the United States might not have thought about the possibility of a tropical virus being responsible.

In St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Dominica, doctors saw many patients with Zika in the middle months of 2016. On May 4, 2017, PAHO, the Pan American Health Organization, published cumulative statistics reporting hundreds of cases of Zika in 2016 in all three islands. We know that only about 20% of people who are infected with Zika have any symptoms. This means that many more people were infected, but had no symptoms.

After a discussion of Zika at our Board meeting on May 11, Dr. Chuck MacCarthy contacted medical authorities in St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Dominica for information about the current state of the Zika epidemic. They all said that they were not seeing any new Zika cases in 2017. Several suggested that Zika would remain as an "endemic" low level risk, similar to Dengue and Chikungunya, two other viruses carried by aedes aegypti mosquitoes – the same ones that have killed millions of people in other parts of the world, with Yellow Fever and Malaria.

DECLINE AND FALL

New cases of Zika are estimated to have peaked last year and have dropped sharply.



This illustration is taken from an article published in the International Weekly Journal of Science, NATURE, on May 24, 2017. (Just one day before our latest Board meeting.)

The article points out that, “Epidemiologists say that they are unsure why the number of cases of the mosquito-borne disease has declined so steeply, and whether it will spike again in some other region in South America or elsewhere.” It may mean that the disease has, “burnt itself out because enough people have become immune to the virus.”

What is the risk to a “naïve” (not previously exposed to the virus) group of volunteers who arrive soon after a Zika epidemic? We don’t really know, but it can’t be zero risk. We think it must be less of a risk than during an active epidemic. Only time will give us an answer.

At a special meeting of the Board of Directors on May 25, 2017, after reviewing the most recent information, the Board decided to send teams of volunteers to the Caribbean in 2018, under certain conditions:

1. Good News Project staff members and volunteers will be required to review information provided by GNP about the risks from Zika and other illnesses, as well as the known risks of travelling and working in the Caribbean. They will then be required to sign a statement indicating that they have reviewed the information furnished by Good News Project, the CDC and any other sources recommended by Good News Project, and they accept the risks of participation in Good News Project activities in the Caribbean.
2. College students and other volunteers under 21 years of age will also be required to obtain written parental permission to participate.
3. Volunteer teams will be scheduled *if* appropriate group leadership is available, and there is a sufficient number of volunteers for each group, as determined by Good News Project.
4. This decision will be reviewed at the regularly scheduled Board of Directors meetings in July and September, 2017. It is understood by all that new information about the risks of Zika and other health risks may lead to cancellation of Good News Project volunteer groups in 2018.

We need to remind you that there are other aspects of traveling and working in the Caribbean that may be more serious risks than tropical diseases. Traveling by automobile is certainly more hazardous than it is here in the US. Construction work is hazardous anywhere, but the steep terrain in the islands makes it more difficult and risky. Living and working in a tropical climate is a new stress for many of us. Even sunburn and sea urchins are risks. And, medical facilities are limited in the islands. Veteran GNP volunteers have known all of this for many years.

For recent, accurate information for travelers, we encourage you to consult:

<https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travelers-vfr-chikungunya-dengue-zika>

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - The “CDC” - is an international resource for physicians, scientists and others. Information from the CDC is highly respected as being scientifically accurate, non-political and frequently updated. The CDC website contains information about Zika and the other viruses that might be encountered in the Caribbean. There is specific information for men and women, young and old, for pregnant women or those who might be planning to become pregnant and for those who are sexually active.

Note that the CDC advises pregnant women NOT to visit areas with active Zika infection. Those who are sexually active are warned that the virus may remain in some parts of the body for many months, even in people who were infected, but had no symptoms.

It is the responsibility of all Good News Project volunteers and staff members to carefully consider the information that applies to them in their own life situation, and then to make an informed decision about traveling to the Caribbean.

The CDC website also contains advice about avoiding mosquito bites. Our GNP experience tells us that protecting volunteers from mosquito bites is difficult. The CDC advises us to wear long sleeved shirts, long pants and to tuck them into our socks. It advises the wearing of permethrin treated clothing, but also points out that mosquitoes can develop resistance to permethrin. We do our best, but we can't guarantee that our volunteers will sleep in rooms with window and door screens, or that bed nets will be available. Volunteers are urged to apply mosquito repellants, and re-apply them often. Again, protection is an individual responsibility.

Please feel free to call the GNP office, or contact any member of the Board of Directors, if you have questions or suggestions. We're very cautious, but still optimistic about GNP in 2018!

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