

Vanier Scholar says dengue fever doesn't discriminate

March 1 2011, By Matt Terry

The mosquito may be an annoyance for Canadian cottagers and campers, but for the inhabitants of the world's tropical regions, the insect can be deadly.

Best-known for carrying viruses such as West Nile and diseases such as malaria, mosquitoes can also carry the lesser-known dengue fever, which infects more than 50 million people in more than 100 countries around the world. According to the [World Health Organization](#), almost a third of the planet's population is currently at risk for contracting the disease, which causes headache, rash, and muscle and joint pain and can be life-threatening, yet it receives just a fragment of the global funding that other [tropical diseases](#), such as malaria, receive.

Kate Mulligan, a PhD student in geography and Earth sciences and Vanier Canada Graduate Scholar, is studying dengue fever in collaboration with the United Nations University's Institute on Water, Environment and Health. She says that although the disease is often believed to be connected to poverty and poor public services, her research shows otherwise.

"Water-related illnesses can affect anyone, regardless of socio-economic status," she said.

Mulligan's work focuses on the planned city of Putrajaya in Malaysia. Home largely to government workers, the city was designed to be a showcase of Malaysian innovation. Despite its excellent public services

and high standards for water quality, however, Putrajaya struggles with high rates of dengue fever.

"There was a remarkable amount of planning put into the community, but they didn't take steps to deal with things like standing water, which provides breeding areas for mosquitoes," she said. "Things like the rain gutters being placed out of reach on houses, so that residents can't properly clean them - they have nothing to do with poverty and everything to do with poor planning."

Mulligan says that the traditional link between poverty and water-related diseases may be at the root of both the research funding problem and the sense that wealthy regions are somehow immune to such diseases.

"Does the connection between poverty and the disease imply there is no risk for the wealthy? I think we really have to consider the impact of making this link."

Mulligan's goal is to eventually dispel the idea that dengue fever is connected solely to poverty, which would help in the push for more funding for neglected tropical diseases. She also hopes her research will help urban planners go beyond planning for sport and recreation and start planning for other health issues, such as [dengue fever](#).

"I want them to think about the practicalities of planning for healthy communities," she said. "Once they see that these diseases aren't proxies for [poverty](#), I think they'll be able to better recognize what needs to be done."

Provided by McMaster University

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