

Remote tribe members enter another village, catch flu

July 27 2014, by Nancy Owano



This image shows members of an uncontacted tribe in the Brazilian state of Acre. Credit: Government of Brazil

Advocates for indigenous tribes are worried over incidents last month when some members of one of the last uncontacted tribes in the Peru/Brazil region, across borders, left their home in Peru and entered the village across the border, making contact for the first time with people in a settled Ashaninka community. The seven were sickened, alarming researchers about the risk of how diseases may decimate previously isolated peoples with no immunities. Responding to the risks of disease transmission, a government medical team treated the newly

infected people and gave them flu immunizations.

The situation though took another turn when the contacted people then went back to their forest home, Their return has observers worried that they still could spread the sickness back to their tribe. [Science News](#), from the journal *Science*, quoted Chris Fagan, executive director at the Upper Amazon Conservancy in Jackson, Wyoming. "We can only hope that [the FUNAI team members] were able to give out treatment before the sickness was spread to the rest of the tribe in the forest," says Chris Fagan, executive director at the Upper Amazon Conservancy in Jackson, Wyoming. "Only time will tell if they reacted quickly enough to divert a catastrophic epidemic." FUNAI refers to Brazil's Indian affairs department.

On Friday, Heather Pringle reported in Science News that some scientists and Brazil's government disagree if the people who came down with flu received enough medical treatment. "At least one scientist fears that the illness is just the start of a health catastrophe for the tribe."

The scientists say fuller precautions may have had to be taken regarding the seven people who then slipped back into the forest. In Pringle's report, anthropologist Kim Hill of Arizona State University said a health worker or anthropologist should have been sent with the departing individuals to administer antibiotics in case pneumonia and other infections spread in the home village.

What are the reasons for last month's contact? Reports say illegal loggers and drug smugglers may be forcing people in isolated groups to leave their land and look for assistance elsewhere in settled communities. A report in The Guardian noted growing drug trafficking activity across the border. "Peru has [overtaken](#) Colombia as the world's biggest producer of coca leaf, the primary ingredient for cocaine and crack. Brazil is the second biggest market for the drugs after the US."

Virologist Frederick Hayden of the University of Virginia in Charlottesville said in Science that he thought, in general, that the flu immunizations could do some good, although he did not know the particulars of this case. The [shots](#), while not effective at treating the illness, could protect the seven people from future exposure to flu. Hayden added that early treatment with influenza antiviral medications could shorten the duration of illness and reduce the risk of lower [respiratory tract infections](#).

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