

# New Sri Lankan health minister vows to help kidney patients

January 20 2015, by Bharatha Mallawarachi

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Sri Lanka's new health minister said a mystery kidney disease that has ravaged farmers in part of the country for two decades will be given top priority under the newly elected government.

An estimated 70,000 to 400,000 people have been sickened in the North Central province's rice basket, and despite years of research, the cause of the chronic disease has not been determined. Thousands of patients require regular dialysis treatments but Sri Lanka, with fewer than 200 machines available, cannot meet the need.

"I will give priority to enhance the dialysis facilities for the [kidney patients](#), and I will be getting 100 million rupees (about \$760,000) for this purpose," Health Minister Rajitha Senarathna said Monday, adding that the money will come from private donations.

He said one section of the main regional Anuradhapura Hospital will be set up for [kidney](#) treatment. The government also plans to launch another program to provide free lunches and vitamins for students in the affected area to help improve their nutrition levels and overall health.

Senarathna is part of the newly formed Cabinet named by President Maithripala Sirisena, a former [health minister](#) who hails from one of the hardest-hit areas. Sirisena was elected earlier this month in a surprise upset of the powerful incumbent. As part of his campaign, he donated money received for election posters to a fund set up for kidney patients. He also has promised to do more to address the problem.

Senarathna commented a day after an Associated Press report on the [kidney disease](#), which is believed to have killed up to 20,000 people since it was first detected in the 1990s.

Water is seen as a possible source, but it came up clean in a World Health Organization study that found 15 percent of adults in three districts were sickened. Male farmers over 39 years old were the hardest hit, even though more women with less-advanced disease were seen overall. Elevated cadmium and pesticide residues were detected in urine, leading the authors to surmise they may be damaging patients' kidneys over time, in combination with other factors such as arsenic.

Many believe heavy use and misuse of agrochemicals could be playing a role.

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