

# Interview: IOC medical chief seeks to allay Zika fears

February 11 2016, by Stephen Wilson

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In this July 30, 2015 file photo, Richard Budgett, the IOC medical director, speaks to the Associated Press during an interview in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Seeking to calm fears over the Zika outbreak, the IOC medical director told The Associated Press on Thursday Feb. 11, 2016 that "everything that can be done is being done" to combat the virus in Brazil and provide safe conditions for athletes at the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. (AP Photo/Vincent Thian, File)

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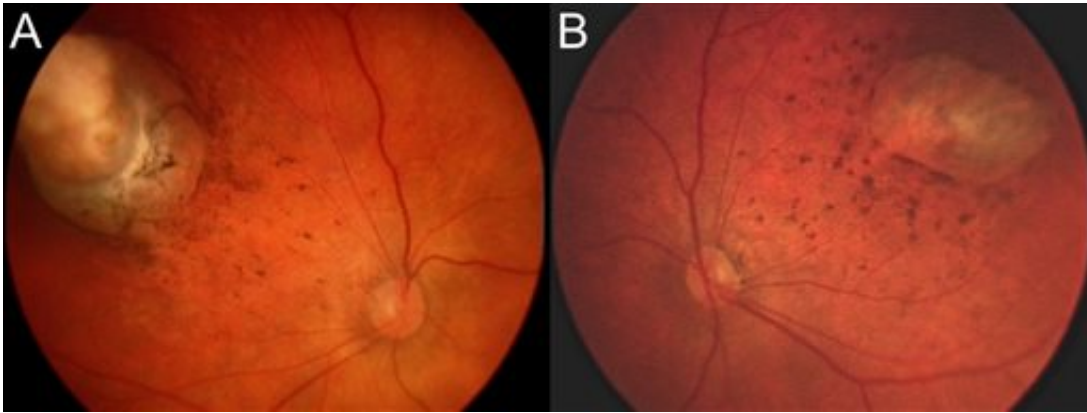
In an interview with The Associated Press, Dr. Richard Budgett said there are no health warnings against traveling to Brazil, except for pregnant women, and stressed that no consideration has been given to postponing or canceling the games.

"Our priority is to protect the health of the athletes,' Budgett said on Thursday. "The IOC absolutely is not complacent. We do take this very seriously. ... Everything is being done to contain and reduce this problem in the lead-up to the games."

Brazil is the epicenter of the Zika outbreak, raising concerns about the potential risks of infection during the Aug. 5-21 Olympics. The World Health Organization has declared Zika a global health emergency.

Health officials are investigating whether there is a link between Zika infections in [pregnant women](#) and cases of microcephaly, a rare condition in which infants are born with abnormally small heads. Pregnant women have been advised against traveling to infected areas.

As the virus has spread across Latin America, anxiety has grown among athletes and Olympic teams. Budgett said the situation should be kept "in perspective."



This combination of images provided by the American Medical Association shows abnormalities at upper left and upper right on the back areas of the inner eyes of a 1-month-old boy diagnosed with microcephaly due to a possible Zika congenital infection. In results published in JAMA Ophthalmology on Tuesday, Feb. 9, 2016, researchers found eye damage in 10 of 29 babies born with microcephaly at the Roberto Santos General Hospital in Salvador, Brazil. (American Medical Association/JAMA via AP)

"Everything that can be done is being done," he said by telephone from Lillehammer, Norway, a day ahead of the opening of the Winter Youth Olympics. "We can give the reassurance that authorities in Brazil are taking it extremely seriously.

"Concern and worry is appropriate, but there is no restriction on travel," Budgett added. "People need to take measures to avoid being bitten and be sensible. There is no recommendation from health authorities to change travel plans."

Budgett said the possibility of calling off the games has never been on the table.

"Absolutely not," he said. "No one from the public authorities or World Health Organization or government ministry are actually saying we

should even consider canceling the games."

Budgett reiterated the position that the threat from mosquitoes should be reduced during the Olympics because the games will be during Brazil's winter, when temperatures are colder and drier.

Brazilian organizers plan to send a letter to all national Olympic committees and international sports federations to explain how they are dealing with the virus, Budgett said.

Rio organizing committee spokesman Mario Andrada confirmed that a memo would be sent on Friday or over the weekend.

"Our main job is to calm down everybody," Andrada told the AP. "The panic is starting (to be) a little too much. We are looking for true facts to make sure we don't generate any unnecessary worries."



NIH National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony Fauci, center, sitting next to CDC Director Tom Frieden, left, testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2016, before the House Foreign Affairs, Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations subcommittee and Western Hemisphere subcommittee joint hearing on: 'The Global Zika Epidemic.' (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Budgett said the IOC is in regular contact with the WHO, which has a unit dealing specifically with mass gatherings, such as the Olympics.

"The IOC are not experts on infection disease," he said. "We follow the experts, and the WHO and the others at the moment say there is absolutely no restriction on travel, but to seek advice if you are pregnant or planning to be."

The U.S. Olympic Committee said it would hire two infectious disease specialists to advise potential Olympians who are worried about the Zika outbreak.

"That's absolutely fine," Budgett said. "Everyone involved should take the best expert advice."

Among athletes who have openly voiced worries about going to the games is U.S. goalkeeper Hope Solo.

"All I can do is speak for myself. If the Olympics were today, I would not go," she said Wednesday in Frisco, Texas.

Budgett said comments such as Solo's are positive and negative.

"It shows people are taking their health seriously and want to protect

their health. That's good," he said. "It's negative in that it's not actually following the advice of health authorities."

Ultimately, he said, the choice is up to each individual.

"You certainly can never force anyone to go," he said. "We just have to keep reiterating the official advice of world [health authorities](#)."

Meanwhile, the Australia team medical director said water quality will be more of a threat to the health of athletes and officials at the Olympics than Zika.

In a telephone interview with the AP, Dr. David Hughes said the polluted waters of Guanabara Bay and other aquatic venues for Olympic events were a serious [health](#) issue.

"If someone gets a nasty gastro infection, vomiting and diarrhea, it's not ideal for competing in an Olympic environment," Hughes said.

Testing of Guanabara Bay conducted by the AP over the last year shows disease-causing viruses linked to human sewage at levels well above what would be considered alarming in the U.S. or Europe.

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Citation: Interview: IOC medical chief seeks to allay Zika fears (2016, February 11) retrieved 4 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-02-ioc-medical-chief-allay-zika.html>

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