

International Chagas Day draws attention to serious infection

April 17 2017, by Dipali Pathak

April 14 marks International Chagas Day, which signifies an important awareness day for those living with or concerned about Chagas disease, a chronic disease that is caused a parasitic microorganism, *Trypanosoma cruzi*, and is transmitted by kissing bugs. Experts at the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine are taking a comprehensive approach to tackling the disease through research, clinical care and vaccine development.

"More than 6 million people are infected globally with *T. cruzi*, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has estimated that 37,000 people in Texas have Chagas disease," said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. "Chagas disease can progress to a heart condition known as Chagasic cardiomyopathy, a major cause of cardiac morbidity and mortality and sudden death."

New estimates indicate that among patients diagnosed with Chagasic cardiomyopathy, approximately 17 to 18 percent will die within the next five years, which is why understanding the prevalence of the disease and diagnosing it has become even more important in recent years, Hotez said.

While it was previously thought to be a disease that is endemic only in Latin American countries, new research by scientists at Baylor, including Drs. Melissa Nolan Garcia and Kristy Murray and their colleagues, have found that transmission of Chagas from kissing bugs is significant in

Texas, especially central Texas. Researchers encourage those who think they have been exposed to the triatomine bug to get tested for the infection. While symptoms are not always immediately apparent, they can include swelling of the eyelid as well as swollen tissue around the bite wound.

"It's important to be tested even if there are no symptoms because we know that as many as one in three people living with Chagas disease could progress to Chagasic cardiomyopathy," Hotez said.

While there is no cure for the disease, treatment of patients before they develop cardiac signs and symptoms could be life-saving. In Texas, a program of active surveillance could save thousands of lives annually.

The National School of Tropical medicine team also is actively researching the first Chagas disease vaccine, which is advancing toward clinical trials through the Texas Children's Hospital Center for Vaccine Development.

"We hope that a new therapeutic vaccine will be developed in the coming years, one that will augment or improve existing anti-parasitic treatments," said Dr. Maria Elena Bottazzi, associate dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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