

Neglected tropical diseases rarely make the headlines

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A new study of leading news organizations has found that neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) rarely make headlines, despite the huge amount of illness, suffering, and poverty that they cause. The study is published May 14th in the open-access journal *PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases*.

Mangai Balasegaram (Bordeaux University, France) and colleagues searched the archives of 11 leading international, English-language media, from 1 January 2003 to 1 June 2007, to assess news coverage of NTDs.

The news media included 6 newspapers (The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Financial Times), BBC Online, CNN.com, the international news wire Agence France Presse (AFP), and two news magazines (Time and The Economist). The researchers also interviewed leading health journalists at these organizations to gain insight into the findings and investigate factors influencing reporting.

During the 53-month study period, they found only 113 articles on NTDs. In comparison, there were over 1000 articles that mentioned HIV/AIDS in the AFP database alone during this same study period. There was wide disparity in coverage between the various media: the BBC had the highest coverage (20 articles) followed by the Financial Times and AFP, and CNN had the least coverage (only 1 article during this study period). Coverage of global health issues was particularly poor in the American media.

Journalists who were interviewed for the study generally agreed that the NTDs had not been adequately covered, but said a lack of real news development and the need to cater to domestic audiences were major obstacles for NTD reporting. All journalists said health agencies, particularly the World Health Organization and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, were not communicating adequately about the burden of NTDs.

Balasegaram and colleagues conclude that "public health agencies need to raise priority for NTD advocacy."

Source: Public Library of Science

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