

Intensive scientific approach needed to control Chikungunya in Kerala:

Experts

Opinions

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A seminar and interactive session organized by CEET in Kottayam, Kerala, on August 18, 2007, attended by scientists, doctors, environmentalists, activists and students, analyzed various aspects of the recent outbreak of chikungunya in Kerala, the southern state of India, which created lot of panic among the inhabitants. Kerala, which is a state known for its great achievements in the field of health and education in India, has been literally bewildered with the outbreak of viral diseases such as chikungunya and dengue since June 2007, the beginning of the Monsoon season. The outbreak was first observed in two Central Travancore districts, Kottayam and Pathanamthittah, both enriched with rubber plantation. Chikungunya is mainly transmitted by aedes mosquito, and hence the control can be achieved only by controlling these mosquitoes.

Although the number of cases has been considerably decreased in recent weeks, those affected are still struggling with a variety of after-effects. The seminar was intended to address mainly the prevention of such viral diseases in the coming years by scientifically analyzing the various related factors. The secretary of CEET, Dr.C.T.Aravindakumar, had explained the objectives of the program as CEET plans to take up long term efforts for environment education to people who lives in vulnerable areas, and for advising the authorities the various ways to contain the problem. Dr. B. Eqbal (a health activist and former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kerala) had inaugurated the seminar, by explaining the need for urgent scientific preparations to control the disease. It is natural that such contagious diseases appear in any part of the world. However, we need a well designed scientific approach to control the disease. In the present case, we failed in this approach, he said. We had enough warning from the last year outbreak of chikungunya in some parts of Chertalai, a place in Alleppy district of Kerala. However, we did not learn any lesson from those incidents. He congratulated CEET for bringing experts from research organizations, medical colleges, universities, and non-governmental organizations, and for evolving collective ideas from experts working in different areas. He also hinted at the need to implement drug regulations in the state.

Prof. A.P. Thomas (Director, School of Environmental Sciences of Mahatma Gandhi University), in his presidential address, expressed his concern over the deterioration of environment due to unscientific disposal of bio-wastes. He expressed the view that research activities in the medical field in the state of Kerala, is far less than adequate. It is necessary that alternate therapies like Ayurveda and Homeopathy need to be explored in controlling the viral diseases. The Director of the Rubber Research Institute of India, Dr. James Jacob, presented the economic impact of chikungunya in the rubber tapping areas. A loss of rupees 4.8 billion is estimated in this area. Dr. Jacob was under the view that the rules and regulations in the state of kerala are not judiciously implemented to control the spread of contagious diseases including chikungunya.

Dr. E. Sreekumar, a senior molecular biologist from the Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology and a person who is involved in the study of chikungunya viruses and their transformations, explained that his centre had earlier identified forms I, II, III and IV category of dengue fever. He has also stated that

techniques are available in his centre to identify the chikungunya within 8 hrs after procuring the blood samples of the patients. According to his studies, most of the fever cases reported during June-July, 2007 in the state belong to chikungunya.

Dr. Binu Areekal who was a part of the medical team and had carried out several studies in this area, shared his experiences when he visited fever hit areas during May-July 2007. He felt that many are ignorant about the details of chikungunya and dengue fever. He is under the impression that unless we start effective measures to control mosquitoes immediately, such viral outbreak will be continued even in the coming years. Dr. Binu in his presentation informed the gathering that a vaccine is available for chikungunya, however it is not cleared to distribute to the public yet.

A study undertaken by the Tropical Institute of Ecological Sciences, Kottayam, gave a very different opinion about the fever out-break in Kerala. Its Principal Investigator, Dr. Punnan Kurian, stated that the scientific community has failed to confirm the identity of the fever. His conclusion was the result of an extensive survey made among thousands of affected people in the area.

The seminar was followed by an interactive session which was monitored by Dr. Raju Vallikunnam, a well-known poet in Malayalam. The interactive session was the most vibrant session where students and public interacted with the experts effectively. Many of them criticized both the state government and the scientific community for not doing enough to effectively control the disease.

By and large, the experts suggested a long-term strategy to keep the environment clean and make an effective vector control to prevent these viral outbreak in the coming years. They suggested CEET to deduce a scientific proposal involving all the experts present in the seminar and more from other scientific organizations, and submit to the state government.