

Health

Congo confirms Ebola case

Fake polio markers highlight risk to Pak vaccination drive

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, July 15, (RTRS): Pakistan's polio eradication campaign has hit serious problems with an alarming spike in reported cases that has raised doubts over the quality of vaccination reporting and prompted officials to review their approach to stopping the crippling disease.

The country is one of only three in the world where polio is endemic, along with neighbouring Afghanistan and Nigeria, but vaccination campaigns have cut the disease sharply, with only a dozen cases last year compared with 306 in 2014 and more than 350,000 in 1988, according to Pakistani health officials.

However, there has been a worrying jump this year, with 41 cases recorded, 33 of them in the north-western region of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where many people resent what they see as intrusive and coercive vaccination campaigns often involving repeated rounds of visits, officials say.

Sampling

Just as alarming for health services, environmental sampling has shown the presence of the virus in areas across the country, a clear sign of gaps in vaccination, which must cover the entire population to be effective.

Hopes that transmission of the disease could be ended this year have been abandoned.

"We need to take the bull by the horns and accept there are problems," said Babar Atta, Prime Minister Imran Khan's point person on polio eradication.

As well as the difficulty in reaching very remote areas and keeping track of people moving through big cities like Karachi, there have been problems in collecting reliable data, exacerbated by resistance to efforts to force vaccination.

Efforts to eradicate the disease have for years been undermined by opposition from some Islamists, who say immunization is a foreign ploy to sterilize Muslim children or a cover for Western spies.

Local officials say parents suspicious of mass immunization campaigns have been getting hold of special markers, used by health workers to put a coloured spot on the little fingers of children who have been vaccinated.

"They themselves would mark the fingers of their children, in case of any official visit to countercheck the vaccinated children," one official associated with an international organisation told Reuters in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

Officials estimate that so-called fake finger marking, sometimes in collusion with health workers, is hiding the true scale of refusal rates – and thus gaps in vaccination.

In some areas, as many as 8% of families may be refusing or avoiding vaccination, a level which would mean the disease is not eradicated.

A senior official of the Health Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa said the exact data had been deliberately hidden by local health authorities nervous of being blamed for failing to ensure full coverage. "And the result of

hiding figures had led us to face an epidemic-like situation today," he said.

Resistance

Polio, a disease transmitted through sewage which can cause crippling paralysis particularly in young children, is incurable and remains a threat to human health as long as it has not been eradicated. Immunization campaigns have succeeded in most countries and have come close in Pakistan, but persistent problems remain.

International observers have been watching the situation with alarm for some time. In October, the Independent Monitoring Board, which oversees the global polio eradication effort, wrote in its annual report that there was "something seriously wrong with the programme in Pakistan".

In April, fuelled by rumours on social media that children were being poisoned by the vaccinations, mobs rioted in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and at least three polio workers were killed.

Even without violence, many people consider polio a "US disease". Facing more immediate threats such as a lack of clean water, many do not see why their families should be disturbed by what they consider intrusive foreign-sponsored campaigns.

Health workers, whose closeness to the communities they work in is vital in building trust, face difficult choices in remote areas where kinship and local power structures can often place them under severe pressure not to report cases of non-compliance.

According to many officials, the stubborn hostility to the campaigns and the high levels of avoidance underline the problems with heavy handed repeat visits by health workers and police going after families that refuse vaccination.

"Why are the marker pens in the shops? Because parents want to buy them. They are sick and tired of repeated vaccinations," said Babar Atta.

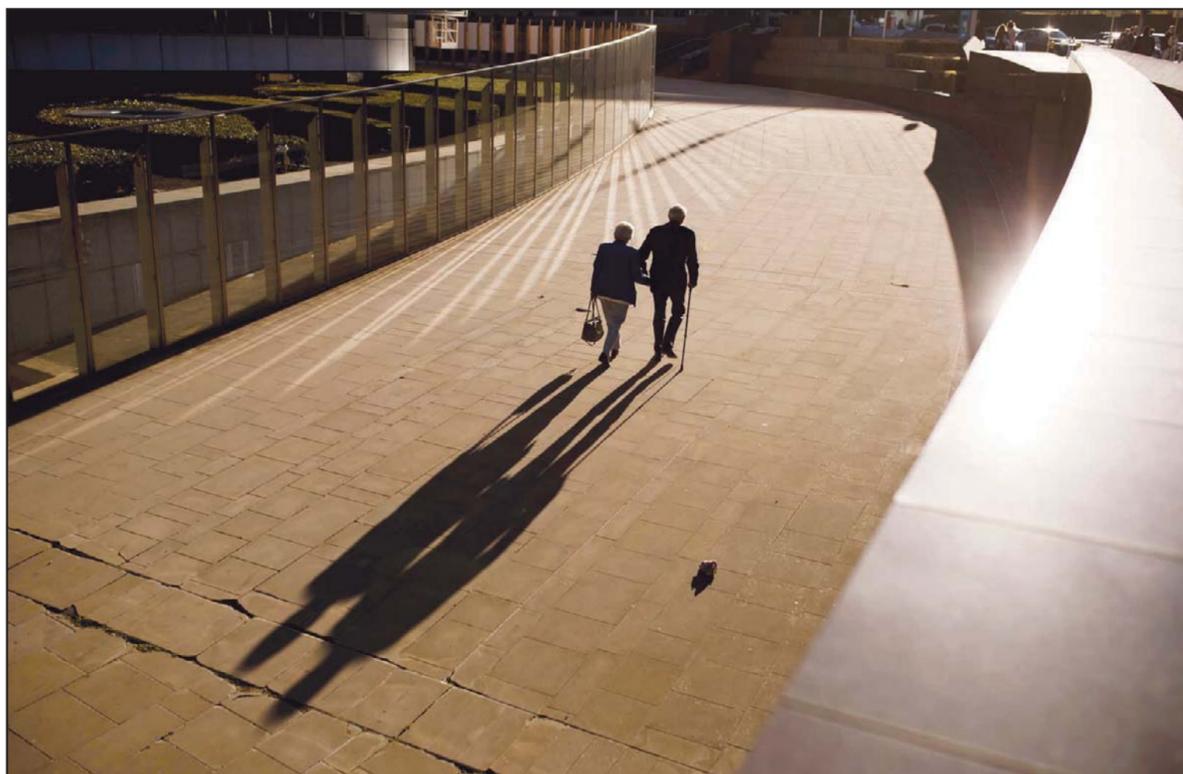
Officials are now looking at more targeted approaches to areas where there are problems overcoming resistance to vaccination involving more persuasion and education.

Also:

GOMA, Democratic Republic of Congo: The first case of Ebola in the eastern Congo city of Goma was discovered on Sunday, officials said, raising concerns the virus could spread quicker in a densely populated area close to the Rwandan border.

Goma, a lakeside city of 1 million people, is more than 350 km (220 miles) south of where the second-largest Ebola outbreak on record was first detected a year ago. But the haemorrhagic fever has gradually spread south, infecting nearly 2,500 people and killing more than 1,600.

The patient was a priest who became infected during a visit to the town of **Butembo**, 200 km (124 miles) north of Goma, where he interacted with Ebola patients, Congo's health ministry said in a statement.



In this Sept 27, 2018 file photo, an elderly couple walks past the Berlaymont Building, the European Commission headquarters, in Brussels. Research released on July 14, 2019 suggests that a healthy lifestyle can cut the risk of developing Alzheimer's even if you've inherited genes that raise your risk for the mind-destroying disease. (AP)

About 50mn people have dementia

Healthy lifestyle may offset genetic risk for Alz's

LOS ANGELES, July 15, (Agencies): A healthy lifestyle can cut your risk of developing Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia even if you have genes that raise your risk for these mind-destroying diseases, a large study has found.

People with high genetic risk and poor health habits were about three times more likely to develop dementia versus those with low genetic risk and good habits, researchers reported Sunday. Regardless of how much genetic risk someone had, a good diet, adequate exercise, limiting alcohol and not smoking made dementia less likely.

"I consider that good news," said John Haaga of the US National Institute on Aging, one of the study's many sponsors. "No one can guarantee you'll escape this awful disease" but you can tip the odds in your favor with clean living, he said.

Results were discussed at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference in Los Angeles and published online by the Journal of the American Medical Association.

About 50 million people have dementia, and Alzheimer's disease is the most common type. Genes and lifestyle contribute to many diseases, but researchers only recently have had the tools and information to do large studies to see how much each factor matters.

One such study a few years ago found that healthy living could help overcome genetic risk for heart disease. Now researchers have shown the same to be true for dementia.

Dr Elzbieta Kuzma and colleagues at the University of Exeter Medical School in England used the UK Biobank to study nearly 200,000 people 60 or older with no signs or symptoms of dementia at the start. Their genetic risk was classified as high, medium or low based on dozens of mutations known to affect dementia. They also were grouped by lifestyle factors.

After about eight years of study, 1.8% of those with high genetic risk and poor lifestyles had developed de-

Caregiver depression ups ER visits for dementia patients

NEW YORK, July 15, (RTRS): Dementia patients may go to the emergency room more often when their caregivers are depressed, a recent study suggests.

Researchers observed 663 dementia patients and their family caregivers – typically spouses, domestic partners or other relatives – for six months. At the start of the study, 84 caregivers, or almost 13%, had depression.

Caregiver depression was associated with a 73% increase in emergency room use among dementia patients, researchers report in JAMA Neurology.

Based on six months of observation, the researchers calculated that dementia patients who had a caregiver with depression were on track to visit the emergency room 1.5 times a year, compared with 0.8 annual visits for patients without a depressed caregiver.

In absolute terms, caregiver depression was associated with an additional 0.7 emergency room visits per dementia patient per year.

"Caregiver depression and feelings of high caregiver burden are incredibly common among those who care for family members with

dementia," said Dr Elan Guterman, lead author of the study and a neurology researcher at the University of California, San Francisco

"We know that this impacts the quality of life of these caregivers and now we have evidence that this may impact emergency department use for patients with dementia as well, which likely raises the overall cost of care," Guterman said by email.

Caregivers in the study were 64 years old on average and most were female. Dementia patients were 77 years old on average and slightly more than half were female. Depression was more common among younger caregivers, and it was also more common when dementia patients were younger or had more severe disease.

Going to the emergency room also wasn't good for caregivers' mental health.

Each additional emergency room visit was associated with 1.26 times the odds of caregiver depression after six months.

The study wasn't designed to prove whether or how caregiver depression directly causes additional emergency room visits for dementia patients.

It also focused only on caregivers and dementia patients at academic medical centers in three states, and it's possible that results would be different in other care settings or in other parts of the country.

Even so, the results offer fresh evidence that dementia care should encompass support for family caregivers, said Charles Given, professor emeritus at the college of nursing at Michigan State University in East Lansing.

"Family members are confronted with observing the physical and cognitive decline of one of their own, they are unprepared to recognize changes that are significant health threats and thus tend to over compensate by seeking care when it may not be needed," Given, who wasn't involved in the study, said by email.

"Family caregivers need access to primary ongoing care for their patients where they can describe the problem and be offered advice as to what to do, what symptoms to observe and possibly address at home," Given added. "The health care system needs to be alert to the signs of depression in caregivers and help them get the support and counseling that they need."

mentia versus 0.6% of folks with low genetic risk and healthy habits.

Among those with the highest genetic risk, just over 1% of those with favorable lifestyles developed dementia compared to nearly 2% of those with poor lifestyles.

One limitation: Researchers only had information on mutations affecting people of European ancestry, so it's not known whether the same is true for other racial or ethnic groups.

The results should give encouragement to people who fear that gene mutations alone determine their destiny, said Dr Rudy Tanzi, a genetics expert at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Less than 5% of the ones tied to Alzheimer's are "fully penetrant," meaning that they guarantee you'll get the disease, he said.

"That means that with 95% of the mutations, your lifestyle will make a difference," Tanzi said. "Don't be too worried about your genetics. Spend more time being mindful of living a healthy life."

One previous study in Sweden and Finland rigorously tested the effect of a healthy lifestyle by assigning one group to follow one and included a comparison group that did not. It concluded that healthy habits could help prevent mental decline. The Alzheimer's As-

sociation is sponsoring a similar study under way now in the United States.

Healthy living also is the focus of new dementia prevention guidelines that the World Health Organization released in February.

The risk of dementia was reduced by 32% in people with a high genetic risk if they had followed a healthy lifestyle, compared to those who had an unhealthy lifestyle, the study, published in the medical journal JAMA on Sunday, found.

"Our findings are exciting as they show that we can take action to try to offset our genetic risk for dementia," said Kuzma.

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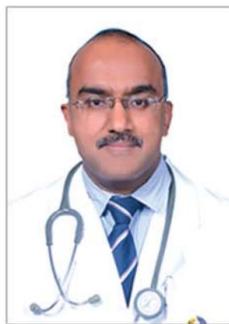
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