

## Health

### Dengue fever up on La Reunion

## Vaccine doubts spread like disease, says vaccine chief

GENEVA, May 22. (RTRS): Doubts about vaccines have spread across social media like a disease and false information that "kills people" should be taken down by the companies running digital platforms, the head of global vaccine alliance Gavi said on Tuesday.

Speaking at a US-sponsored event on the sidelines of the World Health Organization's annual assembly in Geneva, Gavi CEO Seth Berkley said there was a strong scientific consensus about the safety of vaccines.

But social media algorithms favoured sensational content over scientific facts, rapidly convincing people who had never seen family members die from preventable illness.

"We have to think about it as a disease. This is a disease," Berkley said. "This spreads at the speed of light, literally."

WHO says poor vaccination coverage is causing measles outbreaks globally, with numbers spiking in countries that were previously almost free of the disease, including the United States.

Misinformation about vaccines, which the WHO says save two million lives annually, was not a freedom of speech issue and social media firms need to take it offline, Berkley said.

"I remind people that this kills people," he said.

#### Complacency

US Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said complacency, misunderstanding and misinformation were causing vaccination rates to decline globally, with tragic results.

"In my country, social media conspiracy groups confuse well-meaning parents so they hesitate to get the recommended vaccinations," Azar said.

He rejected any criticism of US President Donald Trump, who repeatedly and erroneously tweeted about links between vaccines and autism in the years before he became president.

"A study says @Autism is out of control - a 78% increase in 10

years. Stop giving monstrous combined vaccinations," Trump tweeted in 2012.

Azar said Trump was "extremely firm" in support of vaccination.

"If you had been paying attention in the last month, you would know that the President of the United States, President Trump, was very clear and emphatic: get your shots, get your kids vaccinated, vaccines are safe," Azar said.

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Theresa Tam said health authorities needed to "up our game", adding that she was working with Twitter, Facebook, Google and other tech companies.

"You've got to get into the trenches... and begin to get engaged much more on a personal and emotional level, because people don't understand statistics and data. If you do that (talk about data) you've lost them."

#### Also:

**GENEVA:** Tens of thousands of people are thought to have caught dengue fever in an unprecedented outbreak of the mosquito-borne disease on the French overseas territory of La Reunion, the World Health Organization said on Tuesday.

Authorities in the popular Indian Ocean tourist destination notified WHO of the outbreak in March 2018, since when 50,000 probable cases have been reported, including 22,000 so far this year, the global health agency said in a statement.

Last year, 6,942 of the suspected cases were confirmed to be dengue, a 6,000% increase from 2017. So far this year, there have been 7,700 confirmed cases of the disease, which causes flu-like illness and can kill.

There is no specific treatment for dengue, but with early detection and access to proper medical care fewer than 1% of sufferers die from the disease.

Globally, the number of dengue cases dropped in 2017-2018, but there has been a sharp increase in 2019, especially in **Australia, Cambodia, China, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam.**



In this Jan 21, 2014 file photo, Oumou Balde, 4, (left), plays with her teacher Jacqueline Sanchez (right), and some pretend food in a pre-kindergarten class at the Sheltering Arms Learning Center in New York in a program that was produced in conjunction with the Sesame Street children's television show to educate children about nutrition and health. (AP)

### Rise in suicide rates in youth, especially girls

## Cholesterol level improves in US kids

CHICAGO, May 22. (Agencies): Cholesterol levels in children and teens improved in the latest analysis of US health surveys, yet only half of them had readings considered ideal.

Overall, 7% of kids had high cholesterol in surveys from 2009 to 2016. That was down from 10% a decade earlier. In children, high levels mean 200 or above and ideal measures are below 170.

The results were published Tuesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The researchers say the mixed bag of results could reflect stubborn rates of childhood obesity, offset by US kids eating fewer snack foods containing unhealthy trans fats. Manufacturers began phasing those out before a 2018 US ban.

In the analysis, researchers used 1999-2016 government surveys of 26,000 kids aged 6 to 19 who had home

interviews, physical exams and lab tests.

About 1 in 4 teens and 1 in 5 younger children had unhealthy levels of at least one of type of blood fat, including cholesterol and triglycerides.

High cholesterol in childhood can lead to changes that cause blood vessels to narrow, said Dr Amanda Perak, the study's lead author and a heart specialist at Chicago's Lurie Children's Hospital. Those changes put kids at risk for heart attacks and other heart trouble in adulthood, she said.

In most cases, kids can improve cholesterol levels by adopting healthier habits - eating more fruits, vegetables, whole grains and less processed food, and exercising more, Perak said.

"Lifestyle contributes in the vast majority of cases," she said.

Obesity contributes to unhealthy cholesterol levels yet rates have remained stagnant for US kids and adults. In

2015-16, 21% of teens, 18% of children aged 6-11, and 40% of adults were obese, according to the most recent data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

#### Also:

**WASHINGTON:** Suicide rates among US youth have been on the rise for nearly a decade, with the sharpest increase in young girls, a new study shows.

After examining records from more than 85,000 youth aged 10 to 19 who took their own lives, researchers found that between 2007 and 2016, suicides among children aged 10 to 14 climbed by nearly 13 percent annually among girls, and by a little over 7 percent per year among boys, according to the report in JAMA Network Open.

"What we saw was a significant disproportionate increase in younger female rates," said the study's lead

author, **Donna Ruch**, a researcher at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio. "There's been a gender paradox where we always see rates of death higher in males than in females, but there is a higher rate of attempts and suicidal ideation in females."

Ruch suspects that the bigger increase in deaths among girls is related to changes in the methods girls choose to try to kill themselves.

"Now they are using more lethal means," Ruch said. "And that really concerns us."

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 10 to 19 years in the US, Ruch and her co-authors note.

To take a closer look at suicide trends among the young, Ruch and her colleagues analyzed nationwide data on suicides among kids aged 10 to 19 from 1975 to 2016.

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