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Region Conjunctivitis Epidemic

by LADB Staff

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An outbreak of conjunctivitis is sweeping the region, causing widespread suffering and economic loss. Honduran health authorities issued a cautionary alert asking all persons affected with the disease to stay away from workplaces and schools to prevent spread. The disease is highly contagious.

Early news reports said that over 200 businesses, largely in the US and Asian owned maquila industry, had seen a total absenteeism from the infection of about 10,000 workers, or 5% of the labor force. That number has since grown to 14%, and losses have risen to US\$1 million weekly. The outbreak is being called an epidemic, and it has affected Honduras's two largest cities.

In San Pedro Sula, where more than 2,000 cases had been reported, authorities were considering contracting additional medical personnel to handle influxes of patients, most of whom go to Mario Catarino Rivas Hospital for treatment. When the number for the country had surpassed 29,000, Roberto Tejeda of the city's Instituto Hondureno de Seguridad Social (IHSS), said, "This is not an outbreak, it is an epidemic." Latest reports put the number for school children alone at 60,000, in just six municipalities. Some schools have a 50% rate of absence from the disease. Some schools have closed. Teachers and other school employees have taken children to health centers, where in many instances they have been turned away because the centers could not handle them all.

Health officials have said, however, that, despite the prevalence of cases in the maquilas, treatment priority is being given to children and pregnant women. In Tegucigalpa, large numbers of cases have been attended at the Hospital Escuela, according to the Health Ministry. Health Minister Elias Lizardo has recommended that infected people remain in isolation. A massive communication plan has been devised to alert the people.

A complication of the epidemiological effort is that people have taken conjunctivitis to be a relatively innocuous ailment, and lack fear of contagion, said Dr. Ada Rivera of IHSS. She said they don't know that it can lead blindness. The communication campaign will disseminate this information and will also inform people that it is a recurrent disease. Patients can be infected repeatedly if preventive measures are not taken. The problem is worsened by pharmacies, which sell medicines that could actually accelerate the infection, when they run out of appropriate drugs. People also use home remedies, like lime juice, which is counterproductive. Authorities advise those who have no access to antibiotics to use sterile water to clean the eyes.

But in Nicaragua, newspapers have actually carried articles recommending all kinds of home remedies, including lime juice. In Guatemala, the Public Health Ministry has also declared an alert, after being notified of a "massive" outbreak of some 800 cases in Nicaragua. Officials have requested daily updates from Nicaragua to monitor the spread of the disease. "From just one case in Guatemala, there could be an epidemic," said Francisco Ardon, chief of the Departamento de

Epidemiologia. The disease is highly contagious, he said, and threatens mainly school children and the "most vulnerable" populations.

The disease was last seen in Guatemala in 1998; before that, there was a large epidemic in 1981 that spread through 30 or more countries, including Guatemala. Among Nicaragua's 800 cases, the majority have been patients between 15 and 45 years old. El Salvador has seen 2,388 cases in the last week, making a total since January of 33,629.

The Health Ministry's chief of epidemiology Mario Serpas reported to the press that there had been 256 cases in a 24-hour period. He said, "We think there's been an increase in the last few weeks. There's been a lot of contagion, but we think the problem can resolve itself in a short time, if the population takes preventive measures." He said that there has been an increase of 5,000 cases compared with the January-August period of 2002.

El Salvadoran health authorities are concerned, however, that coming holidays, with people massing at public gatherings, religious observances, beaches, and tourist spots could bring on a blowup of conjunctivitis. Serpas recommended that people with symptoms wash eyes and hands frequently, avoid self-medication, and go to health centers for treatment. He said the situation is worst in the departments of Sonsonate, San Miguel, San Salvador, and La Libertad. He also said preventive action is being taken at the Honduran and Nicaraguan borders, but did not give details of that action.

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