



From the MAFP Presidents Pen -

The Zika Virus – Another Reason to Love the Maine Winter

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By William Sturrock MD, MAFP President
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Unless you've been hibernating under a rock over the past 2 weeks, you could not avoid hearing from the national media about the latest health threat to mankind: the Zika virus. Known since the 1940's as a mosquito-borne illness in the arbo-virus family, it was thought to present only a small risk to person's living in tropical climates. It generally caused a self-limited illness consisting of fever, rash, and joint pain. Better yet, it seemed to give these symptoms to only 20% of those infected; the rest were unaware that they even had the disease. Though it is possible to have an outbreak where one mosquito could transmit it from one person to another, this was not considered as serious as the other diseases known to be carried by its principle vector, the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquito such as yellow fever, encephalitis, and dengue, also known as 'break-bone fever'.

However in the spring of 2015, physicians in the Recife region of Brazil started noticing more cases of microcephaly than they normally expected and this seemed to correlate with a Zika virus outbreak. Normally they would document about 30 infants with this serious developmental anomaly that results in severe intellectual handicaps per year, and now they had over 3,000. There is also speculation that the neurologic disease known as Guillain-Barre syndrome might also be associated with the Zika virus and result in a polio-like paralysis that can be fatal at any age. Although there have been only a few cases of microcephaly serologically confirmed as occurring co-existent with a prenatal infection, and others have questioned the accuracy of the recent counts of possible cases, the alarm was sounded and the story went viral (pardon the pun).

But before we jump in the chorus of 'the end of the world as we know it' which seems to accompany these stories when they first hit the world stage, what is the prudent response to this alleged outbreak? First, you cannot fault the World Health Organization's stated concern that more data and investigation is needed, and that it is possible that many more cases of birth defects could be linked to the virus. Certainly for populations in tropical countries this could become another health risk of mosquito exposure. Also, the US Center for Disease Control has issued a pragmatic recommendation to pregnant women traveling in Central and South America that they



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either consider postponing their travel or take precautions (like using insect repellent and netting). With the upcoming summer Olympics in Rio De Janeiro, many are wondering whether there will be economic fallout of this story to the Brazilians, who do not need another reason for economic bad news.

However, we must acknowledge that there are more known causes of devastating fetal infections such as Hepatitis B, rubella, HIV and herpes that are already occurring in both first world and developing countries, and can be prevented with appropriate prenatal care. We do not have to start setting up tents in New Jersey parking lots, nor do we need to consider building a great wall of mosquito netting on our southern borders and expect the Brazilians to pay for it. Putting other public health concerns into proper perspective, the contaminated water in Flint Michigan or the narcotic addiction problem in many US locales will likely harm more US citizens than the Zika virus will. For those truly interested in preventing harm to our children, an argument can be made that the prevention of unnecessary violence, from domestic abuse to car accidents to gunshot injuries would be campaign more worthy of our efforts than worrying about Zika.

Still, everyone gets fascinated by 'the next plague'. As for me, I'm just happy to have another reason to love our cold weather. Entomologists tell us that the *Aedes Aegypti* buggers (and their cousins the *Aedes Albopictus*) are not found north of Long Island Sound because they cannot tolerate our winters. So if we really want to get serious about preventing the Zika virus from getting established here in northern New England, we should all support every effort to prevent global warming and raise a toast to the weatherman every time he promises another blast of the Northern Vortex. It turns out that cold air is the best cure for multiple insect pests, from deer ticks to Japanese beetles as well as the pesky mosquito that can bring a lot more problems than Zika.