

Tropical diseases ignored by Western media: study

Western media rarely carry news about tropical diseases, notwithstanding the huge suffering and poverty that they cause in the developing world, according to a study.

Mangai Balasegaram of Bordeaux University combed the archives of 11 leading international, English-language media, from Jan 1, 2003, to June 1, 2007, to evaluate news coverage of what is known as neglected tropical diseases, or NTDs.

The media included six newspapers - The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph and The Financial Times - plus BBC Online and CNN.com, international news wire AFP, and two news magazines, Time and The Economist.

The researchers also interviewed leading health journalists at these organisations to gain an insight into the findings and investigate factors influencing reporting.

During the 53-month study period, they found only 113 articles on tropical diseases. In comparison, there were over a thousand articles that mentioned HIV/AIDS in the AFP database alone during this same study period.

There was wide disparity in coverage between the various media: the BBC had the highest coverage (20 articles) followed by the Financial Times and AFP, and CNN had the least coverage (only a single article).

Coverage of global health issues was particularly poor in the American media.

Journalists who were interviewed generally agreed that the tropical diseases had not been adequately covered, but said a lack of real news development and the need to cater to domestic audiences were major obstacles.

All journalists said health agencies, particularly the World Health Organisation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, were not communicating adequately about the burden of tropical diseases.

Balasegaram concludes that 'public health agencies need to raise priority for NTD advocacy'.

The study has been published in the open-access journal PLoS Neglected Tropical Diseases.

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