

Dirty behaviours hampers our resilience – Jamilla Sealy (26) Barbados



Late last year, a virus plagued the region. Like the dengue fever, chikungunya, dubbed Chik-V, is transmitted via the tiny terrors: mosquitoes. The *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which transmits the virus, is no stranger to our tropical islands since the dengue emergence in the 1990's. The Chik-V epidemic threatened the health of thousands of Caribbean people and also the regional economies.

Firstly, 2014, was the hottest year ever recorded in the history of temperature records, according to a January 2015 British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report. We all felt the seemingly 'extended summer' which ran from June through September until early November. When it was normally supposed to be getting cooler, it seemed like summer never ended. That time was also the wet season for the region. These two factors spelt perfect conditions for the mosquitoes to breed and multiply.

From around September, the first cases of the virus were reported. Persons were getting flu-like symptoms but with so many different side effects, no one really knew the difference. Some symptoms included rashes, joint pains, fever, fatigue and some persons were also even hospitalised. The virus was also rumoured to stay within affected persons for up to six months. Thousands of persons, elderly, children, teachers, doctors, persons from all walks of life, were all simultaneously falling ill to this virus.

Due to this epidemic, so many persons of the working force were home on sick leave for several months that led to a tremendous decrease in productivity in the country. This also caused persons to spend more of their income on healthcare for months. What about those without health insurance or depended on work hours for their main income earner for their families? As cases increased, almost everyone knew someone affected by the virus.

Additionally, for tourism-based economies like most Caribbean territories are, having a rampant virus is a public relations nightmare. Persons would not want to visit a country where their health may be in jeopardy and can therefore cause a decline in the number of tourists. One American celebrity, Lindsay Lohan, actually contracted the disease but announced it via social media, to her millions of followers. The governments had to be working hard to reduce the damage this would cause.

Subsequently, widespread media campaigns were done by the governments to raise awareness of the virus and featured preventative measures. While, this is largely a behavioural problem through improper waste disposal methods such as littering and illegal dumping

(which may lead to increased breeding sites), climate change does have some part to play. According to leading climate scientists, and observed records, temperatures are increasing and precipitation is becoming more unpredictable. Increasing temperatures can also extend the areas in which mosquitoes can survive. This means that mosquitoes may be found higher up mountains than before in the Caribbean context.

While we are quite happy that the epidemic is now quite diminished, there is also the possibility of a new terrible strain of the virus or the re-emergence of an old one. Another potentially dangerous virus which popped up is the Zika Virus, in which a case was reported in Brazil in May of this year. This is only less than a year after the Chik-V epidemic. Too close to comfort? Climate change is happening whether we like it or not so let's not make matters worse by littering. Will the CARICOM be ready for another virus of epidemic proportions? Will our people take their health more seriously and not add to their vulnerability? Let's clean up our act now before it's too late.