Increasing awareness of zoonotic diseases among health workers and rural communities in Southeast Asia

Jeffrey Gilbert, Delia Grace, Fred Unger, Lucy Lapar, Rainer Assé, Korapin Tohtubtiang, Khieu Borin, Yang Guorong, Winda Digna, Mai Van Hiep and Amanda Wyatt

More than 6 out of 10 human infectious diseases come from animals (zoonoses). Southeast Asia is considered one of the hotspot areas for zoonotic disease emergence. The combination of rapid growth of economies and human population has created favourable conditions – livestock intensification, disrupted wildlife habitats and changes to land use – which are ideal for zoonotic disease emergence.

Many people in Southeast Asia are familiar with avian influenza or severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) because these diseases emerged within the region and thus received a lot of attention due to outbreaks or threat of outbreaks. Yet not many people would be able to tell you much about long-established zoonoses such as brucellosis or leptospirosis, when in fact these diseases remain quite common across the region.

Zoonotic diseases tend to be most prevalent in places where awareness about the disease, prevention and control are low. Lack of awareness, frequently in combination with conditions of poverty, means that risky behaviours persist and populations remain vulnerable. Risky behaviours related to animal management and food consumption can put communities at risk for zoonoses.

Public awareness and education efforts can help in tackling zoonoses. For the past five years, EcoZD (see definitions), an action research project on zoonotic diseases has been working in six countries in Southeast Asia. Each country team consisted of local individuals and institutions with knowledge of Ecohealth (see definitions), representing multiple disciplines carrying out research on zoonotic emerging infectious diseases. In a number of countries, the teams started by evaluating the familiarity of local communities, health workers and occupational groups with zoonoses.

This brief highlights what the teams learned about risky behaviours and practices in local communities and strategies they developed to raise awareness.

EcoZD, also known as the Ecosystem Approaches to the Better Management of Zoonotic Emerging Infectious Diseases in Southeast Asia project was an initiative funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and coordinated by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). The project worked in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

Ecohealth is an approach that recognizes there are links between humans and their biophysical, social and economic environments that are reflected in an individual’s health. Ecohealth brings together physicians, veterinarians, ecologists, economists, social scientists, planners and others to understand how ecosystem changes are negatively impacting human health and to provide practical solutions to reduce the negative health impacts of ecosystem change.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases, Division of High-Consequence Pathogens and Pathology, 2013. About One Health. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/about.html
Direct consequences of low awareness

The project highlighted five direct consequences of low awareness of zoonotic diseases.

1. Disease impacts are not assessed

If a disease is not widely known or of less dramatic immediate impact, then it is unlikely that resources will be devoted to investigating its prevalence and impacts. Zoonoses don’t just have impacts on human health; they also cause economic losses to the livestock sector and can threaten wildlife. Many of the diseases in the projects were not considered diseases of high importance in terms of government priorities. These attitudes were not necessarily based on evidence, as in most cases, recent animal and human health data on these diseases did not exist at the national or district level. As a result, decision-makers at various levels tended to prioritize attention to other health issues that may have appeared to be a larger threat. For example, leptospirosis (see definitions) is one of the most common zoonotic diseases globally and more than half a million severe cases are diagnosed in humans each year. Even so, the team in southern Vietnam could find very little recent prevalence data on the disease in humans and pigs.

How can leptospirosis be prevented?

Pigs, cattle and rodents are important reservoirs for Leptospira and shed these bacteria in their urine. There are some simple things that can reduce people’s risk of exposure to leptospirosis. People working with animals should carefully follow personal hygiene measures and use disinfectant. Wearing protective clothing like gloves or boots when cleaning animals and their pens will reduce the chance of bacteria entering the body through cuts or scratches on the skin. The risk of leptospirosis spreading among animals can be reduced if they are separated by pens into smaller groups rather than kept in large groups.

2. Economic costs go unrecognized

Low awareness among health care workers means that it is less likely that a disease will be diagnosed in animals and humans. Poor detection leads to increased economic costs for individual households and society as a whole. For example, people affected by the disease will suffer economic losses due to decreased productivity or missed work and costs associated with seeking medical treatment. In the case of leptospirosis, individual pig owners and the pork industry suffer economic losses due to abortions or stunted growth in piglets.

Research on leptospirosis in southern Vietnam found a relatively high incidence of the disease among pigs and humans in the two districts surveyed, which belies the dominant belief that leptospirosis is not an important infectious disease.

3. Basic prevention can be neglected by health workers

With limited knowledge about their responsibilities in the prevention and control of zoonotic disease, animal and human health care workers are not equipped to advise the public on appropriate prevention and control strategies. Some of this lack of knowledge can be explained by structural or institution-
observed that some village veterinarians did not apply consequent biosecurity measures (e.g. use of disinfectant or gloves) when handling sick animals, which can pose a great threat to their own health or transmit brucellosis among other cows in the herd.

Our solutions

1. Use health education materials creatively

Using the synergy of partnerships, the teams used a variety of methods to raise awareness among different groups. In China, the team developed health education materials for farmers and workers in commercial farms. To raise awareness among health workers, the team actively posted publications and brief reports on their brucellosis findings on the websites of the departments of agriculture and public health. Towards the end of the project, the team reported that the provincial-level Centers for Disease Control was conducting more targeted training on zoonoses and Ecohealth approaches for village doctors, veterinarians and farmers.

Recognizing the power of youth to affect the behaviour of their parents, the team in Indonesia developed a rabies awareness curriculum and trained teachers to deliver it in elementary school classrooms in Bali. Using culturally-appropriate materials like brochures, posters, a film and songs, the teachers were able to present the messages in ways that were memorable and easily transferrable to other communities in Bali. In Cambodia, during feedback meetings with village health volunteers and farmers, the team discussed possible measures to control diarrhoea using the existing remedies in the villages. This kind of interactive discussion between researchers and community members became a useful tool for building community awareness about health risks and disease prevention.

2. Empower paraprofessional groups

The team in Indonesia built upon the existing village cadres system to establish Village Rabies Working Groups (VRWG), which supported the rabies control efforts of the Livestock Service Office. The VRWG (see definitions) was a paraprofessional group equipped to raise awareness about rabies in schools, village meetings and small groups in their own homes and serve as first responders to dog bite cases. General information on rabies and what it means to be a responsible dog owner encouraged communities to register and vaccinate their dogs, two evidence-based ways to control rabies. The model was recognized by provincial-level leaders as a promising community intervention. As a result, a legal decree was made to adopt the village rabies cadre system by officially appointing two persons to serve in this capacity in each of the 723 villages in Bali. In addition, the EcoZD team partnered with the provincial-level leaders to provide technical training for the rollout of VRWGs in 30 rabies hotspot villages.

The cadre are all local volunteers, selected based on their willingness to protect their own village from rabies with no consideration of gender, age, educational background or occupational status. The VRWG becomes an official structure of the village legalised by a decree of the head of the village and supported by an official letter from livestock services. The VRWG requires some technical support and mentoring from both livestock and health services to ensure that it provides appropriate support to current government rabies initiatives. Funding for the VRWG activities came from a variety of sources, including a microcredit scheme, a local poster competition, local government and external donors. Some of the benefits of the VRWG the team documented include more accurate village-level estimates of the local dog population, increased capacity to provide rapid response to dog bite cases and improved community awareness of what it means to be a responsible dog owner.

3. Host policy workshops

We understood that engagement of decision-makers would be critical to sharing meaningful results that could lead to changed behaviours. The teams conducted policy workshops at the end of their projects to share research results combined with relevant policy and practice recommendations. In southern Vietnam, policymakers, development practitioners and the research community gathered to discuss the research results and their implications for bringing attention to leptospirosis as a potentially serious public health issue and livestock industry concern. One key message that emerged was that in order to improve surveillance of the disease, a joint surveillance mechanism would need to be in place to link and coordinate disease reporting systems between animal and human health. Enhanced laboratory facilities and trained staff were also identified as an immediate need to allow effective identification and differentiation of different types of Leptospira affecting animals and humans.

4. Identify incentives for changing behaviour

Increasing awareness is important, but sometimes incentives are also needed to encourage behaviour change. Incentives can be economic or social. One powerful incentive is promoting behaviour as socially desirable. In Bali, school children and dog owners were encouraged to see responsible dog ownership as socially desirable behaviour, especially the importance of dog registration and rabies vaccination. The team in southern Vietnam recommended that officials enhance the public awareness of local authorities and local socio-political organizations, like unions, about the risk of leptospirosis in rural areas. These bodies are well-positioned to identify the appropriate, context-specific incentives that will accelerate changed behaviours that can reduce the risk of leptospirosis.
Policy recommendations

Policy makers at all levels of government can increase awareness of zoonotic diseases by:

1. Encouraging the development and use of health education materials tailored towards health workers and rural communities.
2. Empowering paraprofessional groups to support existing publicly-funded zoonoses control efforts.
3. Engaging regularly with other stakeholders involved in zoonotic disease management.
4. Identifying appropriate incentives that can be used to encourage changed behaviours that reduce zoonotic disease risks.

Contributors

Jeffrey Gilbert, MD, DVM
EcoZD Project Coordinator, International Livestock Research Institute, Vientiane

Delia Grace, PhD
EcoZD Principal Investigator, International Livestock Research Institute, Nairobi

Fred Unger, PhD
Veterinary Epidemiologist, International Livestock Research Institute, Chiang Mai

Lucy Lapar, PhD
Agricultural Economist, International Livestock Research Institute, Hanoi

Rainer Assé, PhD
Social Scientist, International Livestock Research Institute, Bangkok

Korapin Tohtubtiang, MSc
Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, International Livestock Research Institute, Bangkok

Khieu Borin, PhD
EcoZD Team Leader, Centre for Livestock Development (CelAgrid), Phnom Penh

Yang Guorong, BSc
EcoZD Team Leader, Yunnan Academy of Grassland and Animal Science, Yunnan

Winda Digna, DVM
EcoZD Team Leader, Center for Indonesian Veterinarian Analytical Studies (CIVAS), Bogor

Mai Van Hiep, MSc
EcoZD Team Leader, Department of Animal Health, Ho Chi Minh City

Amanda Wyatt, MPH
Research Analyst, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

Contact

Delia Grace (d.grace@cgiar.org)
Program leader, Food Safety and Zoonoses, ILRI

Theme leader, Agriculture-associated diseases, CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health

http://aghealth.wordpress.com/

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