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Melioidosis: The Infection That Killed Nearly 90,000 People in 2015

14 Jan, 2016
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Melioidosis killed nearly as many people last year, as measles.



On Monday, January 11th, the scientific journal *Nature* published an article in their microbiology section regarding melioidosis, an infection that can kill people and animals within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms. The bacteria that causes melioidosis, *Burkholderia pseudomallei*, is resistant to most common antibiotics and being misdiagnosed and treated with the wrong antibiotic increases the chance of death from the infection by 70%.

Also called Whitmore's disease, Melioidosis begins with symptoms of a wide range of more common infections, such as fever, cough, fatigue and abscesses, leading to the unfortunate misdiagnosis statistics, but it can quickly progress to kidney and other organ failures. There isn't a quick way to test for the bacteria and no vaccination is currently available.

Burkholderia pseudomallei can live in soil or water in tropical areas. In fact, it is so resilient and durable that in a study it has been found to be able to exist in distilled water, completely without sustenance, for over a decade. In order to contract melioidosis, the bacteria must enter through a cut or sore on the skin, be consumed through drinking water, or, in rare cases, inhaled if it has become airborne as a result of extreme weather events such as a tornado or tsunami. Many animals can also become ill from this infection, such as sheep, pigs, goats, cattle, horses, cats and dogs.

This infectious disease is not common in North America. In fact, it has never been found to exist in nature in the U.S. of its own accord. There was that time when researchers in Louisiana had a sample escape containment, most likely on the clothing of a researcher. Sadly, two primates in the lab were infected before it was contained, but the area outside the lab didn't become contaminated. It is thought, but has not been proven, that *B. pseudomallei* may be able to exist in places with a subtropical climate like Louisiana or Florida. At this point, take heart that this nasty germ has not been confirmed to exist in any American's back yard.

Melioidosis is endemic in places such as South and Southeast Asia, Africa, Mexico, South America, and Northern Australia. Due to testing limitations and the lack of medical services in remote and impoverished countries, the authors of the above-mentioned article in *Nature*, "Predicted global distribution of *Burkholderia pseudomallei* and burden of melioidosis", intuit that this infection is underreported and may be endemic in areas where it is rarely or never diagnosed. The estimate of 89,000 deaths in 2015 is a conservative number, making deaths from this disease as common as the measles.

Those with underlying conditions such as respiratory ailments, immune system problems, diabetes or kidney disease are more likely to die from melioidosis. Despite the gloomy outlook for those infected, many people do survive. The almost 90,000 who

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died last year of melioidosis were out of approximately 165,000 estimated infections. Survival rates depend upon proper treatment, as the death rate in Australia is 1 in 10 infections, while the rate is far higher in undeveloped countries. Many cases could be avoided completely if residents of low to middle-income countries were instructed on prevention practices, as the article in *Nature* is urging all nations to do.

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