

**THE ZIKA VIRUS AND CONGENITAL MICROCEPHALY**

The Zika virus, first isolated in 1947, is named after a Ugandan forest from where it was first isolated. It is a flavivirus transmitted by the Aedes mosquito. Initially sporadic cases were reported from some African and Asian countries. Symptoms are mild with fever, rash and arthralgias. In the last couple of years, there has been an epidemic of cases in South and Central America with Brazil alone reporting somewhere between 440,000 to 1300,000 cases.

On 11 November 2015, the Brazilian Ministry of Health declared a public health emergency due to the sharp surge of newborns with microcephaly born in the Northern state of Pernambuco. In 2015, 141 cases of congenital microcephaly were detected against a usual average of 10 cases per year. For Brazil as a whole, nearly 400 cases of congenital microcephaly were detected in 2015 *versus* the usual annual incidence of 150-200. Further testing revealed the Zika virus RNA in the amniotic fluid of pregnant women who delivered neonates with microcephaly. In French Polynesia – that also has an ongoing Zika virus epidemic – there has been an increase in the birth of newborns with CNS malformations and also patients with Guillain Barre Syndrome.

The link between congenital microcephaly and the Zika Virus seems plausible but is yet to be firmly proved. (*The Lancet*; 9 January, 2016)

**OPENING UP OPEN ACCESS**

The Netherlands plans to spearhead efforts in The European Union to make more scientific literature be accessible free soon after publication. The Dutch government, which took over the presidency of the European Union council of ministers this month, has declared furthering Open Access to be one of its top priorities. It is planning a series of discussions between European science ministers to investigate how paid journals can best shift to Open Access. The Association of Universities in Netherlands has already arm-twisted publishers including Springer and Elsevier to increase open access.

Worldwide, there has been a steady growth of open access articles rising from 12% in 2011 to 17% in 2014. In October 2015, Jisc, a non-profit body that represents UK higher-education institutions, negotiated a deal that made OA papers with UK-based corresponding authors free in 1,600 selected Springer subscription journals. A more radical strategy suggested is that libraries or university consortia should stop paying journal subscriptions and should transfer the money saved to their researchers who can

use it to publish open access in journals of their choice. The United States has used different routes; encouraging authors to archive their prepublication manuscript online and asking publishers to make their papers available free after a delay such as 6-12 months. Only worldwide concerted action and pressure against publishers will improve free access to scientific papers. (*Nature*; 8 January, 2016)

**SUICIDES IN KOTA**

Eighteen children committed suicides in Kota city of Rajasthan, India, last year. The Rajasthan High Court has issued a notice to the State and district-level authorities, seeking a reply on the increasing number of suicides and the action being taken to prevent them. The Kota Collector issued directions to all coaching institutions which included ‘mandatory one-day break in a week’, psychiatric consultations to de-stress the students, and compulsory career counseling to each student along with parents prior to admission.

Kota is merely illustrative of the coaching class culture in India today. Coaching and tutorials on top of regular school is now the accepted norm in an adolescent’s life, leaving little or no time for physical exercise, creativity or free play. Away from their families for long periods and forced to attend classes for 12 and more hours, these youngsters often cannot find the physical and psychological strength to withstand the effects of such coaching. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) says that in 2013, suicides related to examination failure totaled 2,471 all over the country. There are, of course, no estimates of the students who are left psychologically broken.

All over the world, there has been a quantum shift in the way children spend their time with declining free play and increasingly structured time schedules. The reason appears to be a social and economic phenomenon born out of middle-class parents’ desire to see their children get ahead. Even in the US, an annual poll of college freshmen shows that most students today list “being well off financially” as more important to them than “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” – the reverse of what existed in the 1960s and 1970s. The shift from intrinsic to extrinsic goals represents a widespread shift toward a culture of materialism fuelled through television and other media.

Do pediatricians have a role to play or should we be mute spectators? (*Economic & Political Weekly* 9 January 2016)

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