

Washington's Zika Vaccination Ploy

Puerto Rico and the Zika Quandary

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Should you fear receiving the needle from a stranger? Yes. Should you fear receiving it from a person you know all too well as a historical abuser? Even more so. Empires do it, states do it, and even local agencies do it. Let's all, as it were, vaccinate for all in this perverted paraphrasing of the Cole Porter song, the assumption that the medical facility cures, and the giver and administrator knows all.

The motivation here in Puerto Rico, benighted by its US territorial status, has become more acute given the issue of the Zika virus, the latest pandemic thrust that has made health authorities nervous, and populations frantic. Having spread from Brazil, Latin America is bracing for a surge in infections, courtesy of the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito.

On August 1, it was reported that some 5,500 confirmed infections existed in the territory, though such "actual numbers are far greater".[1] Up to 50 pregnant women a day may be contracting the virus, though even that number is sketchy.

But the local populace distrusts the material coming out of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), thinking such figures an embellishment of authority. A lingering battle between federal and local health officials over how to cover the problem in the 78 municipalities has also put pay to any systematic response.

Given that the CDC, while sermonising about the high figures of Zika contractions, has bungled on such matters as approving the use of the insecticide naled, suspicions are entirely understandable.

Used to kill insects, primarily adult mosquitoes, naled has the following description on the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment fact sheet: "Naled interferes with cholinesterase, a compound in the insect's body that directs nerve cell activity. This causes the insect's nervous system to be overstimulated, resulting in respiratory paralysis (inability to breathe) and death." [2]

The department's note after this grim description is meant to be reassuring, being registered by the US Environmental Protection Agency and the Colorado Department of Agriculture. (It is, however, banned in the European Union, an inconvenience best left unmentioned.)

Only small amounts need be used in diluted quantities, while over 90 percent breaks down within 30 hours. That said, it had to be "applied properly at very small concentrations" to prevent health problems to humans. Less emphasis is placed on the fact that naled has other environmental effects, such as killing freshwater fish, birds and bees.

The other glitch in the whole business is that the use of naled was a dismal failure in 1987 when it was deployed to fight a dengue outbreak. This all had a ring of familiarity to it, given that the United States had made Puerto Rico its laboratory in the testing of Agent Orange prior to its malicious deployment in Vietnam.

In the sceptical observation of Dr. Iván González Cancel of the Puerto Rican College of Physicians and Surgeons, a possible plot was afoot. "I don't believe in conspiracy theories, but I think this is an experiment with the CDC using Puerto Rico as a laboratory."

The CDC, evidently lacking a memory in that regard, has done little to assuage residents. It even began surreptitiously importing naled last month, a point that infuriated Gov. Alejandro García Padilla. The CDC's own officials even went so far as to suggest that "there is no guarantee it will work this time." [3] This could literally be a futile spraying in the wind.

Local protests have taken place, with participants fully dressed in gas masks and sporting bee puppets. Federal officials have received a tongue lashing from local radio personalities for the nasty symptoms of colonialism (*New York Times*, Jul 31).

And Puerto Rico has seen much of it, very much a victim of colonial powers over half a millennium. Its status is inextricably tied, in dire fashion, to the "Territorial Clause" (Art IV, section 3) of the US Constitution, which would permit Congress, argues Linda Backiel, to "sell or trade Puerto Rico to whomever it wanted, without ever looking south to see what Puerto Ricans thought about it." [4]

As was often the case with US efforts to buy, bully and maim their newly won territories into submission, the most accurate observers were the military members themselves. US commanding officer General Guy V. Henry would say with piercing clarity, notably on the subject of small pox vaccination in the territory after the Spanish American War:

"Hardly had the last representatives of Spanish misrule turned their back upon the island before the American military administration... set on foot, as an act of beneficence to the newly subordinated people vaccination of the entire population."

For old time's sake, Washington has made it clear that it will seize control of the Puerto Rican economy, facilitated by an established fiscal control board. This fact attests, not so much to Puerto Rican profligacy as colonial misrule.

Such legacies run deep, and the sting of colonialism, undue experimentation and bully boy exploitation will mean that any spray programs initiated will be blamed on other motivations. It also feeds other theories that the Zika virus, with its carriers, is all a grand stage show.

As former health secretary advising Governor Padilla, Dr. Johnny Rullán, surmised after attempting, in vain, to persuade incredulous audiences about the value of any naled-led spray campaigns, "Any microcephaly cases that occur now will be blamed on the spray."

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/01/488273976/zika-virus-spreads-more-rapidly-in-puerto-rico>
- [2] http://www.fightthebitecolorado.com/pdfs/factsheet_naled.pdf
- [3] http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/31/health/zika-virus-puerto-rico.html?_r=0
- [4] <http://monthlyreview.org/2015/10/01/puerto-rico-the-crisis-is-about-colonialism-not-debt/>

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