A SHORT COMMUNICATION OF NIPAH VIRUS OUTBREAK IN INDIA: AN URGENT RISING CONCERN

Olivier Uwishema1,2,3*; Jack Wellington MSc (LSHTM) FGMS 1,4; Christin Berjaoui1,5; Kamsi Olivia Muoka1,6; Chinyere Vivian Patrick Onyeaka7; Helen Onyeaka8

1Oli Health Magazine Organization, Research and Education, Kigali, Rwanda
2Clinton Global Initiative University, New York, USA;
3Faculty of Medicine, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey.
4Faculty of Medicine, Cardiff University School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK
5Faculty of Medicine and Surgery, Beirut Arab University, Beirut, Lebanon
6Department of Medical Laboratory Science, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.
7Department of Emergency Medicine, Watford General Hospital, West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Watford, United Kingdom
8School of Chemical Engineering, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B152TT, UK

*Corresponding Author –
Olivier UWISHEMA1,2,3*

Email: uwolivier1@ktu.edu.tr Tel: +905061545340
Authors Information:

1. Name: Olivier UWISHEMA

Affiliation: ¹Oli Health Magazine Organization, Research and Education, Kigali, Rwanda

²Clinton Global Initiative University, New York, USA;

³Faculty of Medicine, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Turkey.

E-mail: uwolivier1@ktu.edu.tr

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0692-9027

2. Name: Jack Wellington MSc (LSHTM) FGMS

Affiliation:

Oli Health Magazine Organization, Research and Education, Kigali, Rwanda

Faculty of Medicine, Cardiff University School of Medicine, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Email: wellingtonj1@cardiff.ac.uk

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5511-1491

3. Name: Christin Berjaoui

Affiliation:

- Oli Health Magazine Organization, Research and Education, Kigali, Rwanda
4. Name: Kamsi Olivia Muoka

Affiliation: ¹Oli Health Magazine Organization, Research and Education, Kigali, Rwanda

⁶Department of Medical Laboratory Science, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria.

Email: kamsimuoka@gmail.com

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6296-2817

5. Name: Chinyere Vivian Patrick Onyeaka

Affiliation:

⁷Department of Emergency Medicine, Watford General Hospital, West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Watford, United Kingdom

Email: chinyereonyeaka@yahoo.com

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8079-7691

6. Name: Helen Onyeaka

Affiliation: ⁸School of Chemical Engineering, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B152TT, UK

Email: h.onyeaka@bham.ac.uk

ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3846-847X
DECLARATION:

Acknowledgement: None

Funding: We have not received any financial support for this manuscript.

Financial support: None.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement: Not Applicable

Ethics Approval: Not Applicable

Declaration of competing interest: None

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION:

Olivier Uwishema: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing-review and Designing
Kamsi Olivia Muoka: Collection and assembly of data
Olivier Uwishema – Reviewed and edited the first draft, supervisor
Jack Wellington MSc (LSHTM) FGMS – Reviewed and edited the second draft.
Helen Onyeaka: Reviewed and edited the final draft, Supervisor
Christin Berjaoui and Olivier Uwishema: Worked on revision
Manuscript writing: All authors
Final approval of manuscript: All authors
A SHORT COMMUNICATION OF NIPAH VIRUS OUTBREAK IN INDIA: AN URGENT RISING CONCERN

ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh, and India have recorded several cases of Nipah virus (NiV) infection. Following the 2018 NiV outbreak in the Kozhikode district of Kerala, India that claimed 17 lives, there has been a recent re-emergence of the virus in the same district, causing the recently reported death of a 12-year-old boy. Accordingly, population panic has heightened as inhabitants of these areas try to together combat the existing COVID-19 pandemic alongside the emerging NiV infection. Although the rate of transmission of NiV is low as compared to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), scientists suggest a higher mortality rate from NiV infection. In this manuscript, we aim to discuss the NiV infection in India as well as suggest recommendations to contain and ameliorate the severe impact of the virus on affected populations.

Keywords: Nipah virus, NiV, India, Outbreak

1. INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of Sunday, September 5, 2021, the people of Pazhur village in Kerala’s Kozhikode district woke up to the news that a tree climber, Vichutti, had lost his son, Muhammad Hashim, after consuming the rambutan fruits he picked by the riverside. Hashim died due to Nipah virus (NiV) infection, the first case in Kerala after the state reported and controlled the May 2018 virus outbreak, during which 17 individuals lost their lives. The death of Hashim has created panic in Southern India as the state battles containing both coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and NiV concurrently.

Nipah virus (NiV) is a pleomorphic virus with an outer wrapping belonging to the paromyxoviridae family and the henipavirus genus. The genetic component of the virus consists of an RNA that is single-stranded, negative, unsegmented and encodes for six genes including nucleocapsid (N), phosphoprotein (P), matrix (M), fusion protein (F), glycoprotein (G) and RNA polymerase (L) [1]. As a zoonotic virus, bats from the genus pteropus serve as natural reservoirs
of NiV. The virus is categorized under the Category C priority pathogen and a biological safety level 4 (BSL-4) pathogen by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The first cases were reported in Malaysia and Singapore between 1998 and 1999 after its discovery in Sungai Nipah where it took its origin [2]. Following the initial outbreaks in Malaysia and Singapore, India recorded outbreaks in 2001 and 2007. Bangladesh also reported eight outbreaks from 2001 to 2012 [3]. In Kozhikode district, Kerala, India, another outbreak was reported on May 19, 2018 [3]. The most recent incidence of NiV infection was reported on September 5, 2021, in the same Kozhikode district, Kerala, India. As COVID-19 continues to rage in some countries, complications in rapid diagnosis and treatment of NiV infection can occur [36-42].

As a result of the high fatality rate of NiV infection, this paper outlines the epidemiology, aetiology, transmission, diagnosis, clinical management and prevention control measures of the NiV to share knowledge that is imperative to control the virus effectively.

2. EPIDEMIOLOGY AND OUTBREAK OF NIPAH VIRUS IN INDIA

In India, Siliguri, West Bengal recorded a significant NiV epidemic in 2001 with 66 presumed cases and 45 deaths. The Nadia district in West Bengal experienced a minor outbreak in 2007 with five cases and a 100% fatality. These epidemics occurred over the border from the Nipah belt in Bangladesh. The Kerala districts of Kozhikode and Malappuram recorded a NiV outbreak in May 2018, although a southern state on the west coast that is geographically isolated from areas that were formerly affected and where date palm sap intake is not widespread. The index case remained undetected in Siliguri in 2001. However, the patient was hospitalised at the Siliguri District Hospital and later infected 11 patients at the same hospital.

Further transmission affected 25 employees and eight visitors after said infected patients were transferred to other hospitals [1]. In the 2007 epidemic, an individual developed the disease after consuming date palm-derived alcohol. The rest, including one healthcare professional, became infected from the initial case [2].

As of June 1, 2018, there had been 18 confirmed cases of NiV infection and 17 fatalities due to the virus [3]. All of the cases were in the economically productive age range, with no sex difference [4, 7]. During the 2018 epidemic, no less than one healthcare practitioner acquired the virus in a
healthcare facility [5, 6, 8]. The most recent epidemic of the NiV was reported on Sunday, September 5, 2021, in Kozhikode district, Kerala, India. A 12-year-old boy, Hashim, died after eating rambutan fruits gathered by his father, Vichutti, along the riverbank. As seen above, all NiV outbreaks occurring in India have been transmitted from person to person.

3. AETIOLOGY OF NIPAH VIRUS INFECTION

The spread of the virus can occur through direct contact with infected animals or the consumption of food or fruits contaminated with the body fluids of infected animals like bats and pigs. Infection can also occur when an individual comes in close contact with an infected person or their bodily fluids, including urine, blood, nasal droplets, and saliva. Reports show that in Malaysia, humans became infected with the virus through pigs which act as intermediate hosts of the virus [9]. These pigs can become infected through the consumption of contaminated fruits by bats infected with the virus [10]. Similarly, humans can become infected through the consumption of infected pigs or bats. The virus can also spread from person to person through direct contact with infected individuals or contact with aerosols from said infected individuals.

A report in Bangladesh that showed some persons infected with the virus had eaten raw palm sap approximately 30 days before disease onset. This proposes that contaminated palm sap by infected bats may serve as the causative agent [11]. There was also a high rate of person-to-person transmission in Bangladesh [12, 13]. Similarities exist between the NiV outbreaks in Bangladesh and India as they were both characterized by person-to-person transmission [13]. To note, these outbreaks were majorly healthcare-associated as hospital staff and caregivers were mostly affected [14]. Although the information is not proven, the Siliguri outbreak is said to have begun in Kerala where the index patient was reported to have caught the virus from infected fruit bats. Further infection occurred through hospital exposure; hence the rate of person-to-person transmission in Kerala was high and like those in Bangladesh and Bengal [14, 15].

4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CORONAVIRUS AND NIPAH VIRUS

There have been speculations among scientists that the next pandemic agent after COVID-19 could most likely be NiV. However, in states like Kerala, COVID-19 precautions have helped mitigate
the spread of the NiV. NiV infection, like COVID-19, is also a respiratory disease and thus, shows similar symptoms. However, loss of sense of smell and taste, which has been noted as a characteristic symptom of COVID-19 infection, is not common with NiV infection. Similarly, some persons who contract NiV remain asymptomatic.

The WHO estimates that the NiV fatality rate is high (40-45%), making it far deadlier than COVID-19, which has a mortality rate between 0.1% and 19% depending on the region of infection. Unlike with COVID-19 when infected individuals are most infectious before symptoms appear, NiV patients demonstrate peak infectious potential during symptomatic stages. To note, although the fatality rate of NiV infection is high, it is less transmissible than COVID-19.

5. CLINICAL SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Variations occur with the incubation period of NiV across several regions. The incubation period in Malaysia was observed to range between four days to two months. The incubation period span ten days and 6-14 days in Bangladesh and Kerala respectively [15, 16, 17]. Clinical features of NiV infection are broad, ranging from asymptomatic to severe. Respiratory distress, nausea, vomiting, headache, fever, and acute encephalitis are major clinical features associated with NiV infection. Other symptoms, such as behavioural distortion, disorientation, pneumonia, and diminished consciousness, have been reported in some patients [18-20]. Muscle pain, cough, nervous system disturbances, seizures, and encephalitis alongside other general symptoms were observed in infected persons during the Kerala outbreak [46,45,48-59]. Higher rates of cases characterized by respiratory discomfort were particularly observed in Bangladesh and India outbreaks [21].

6. DIAGNOSIS

Early detection serves as the rate-limiting step in containing the spread of the virus and mitigating its fatality rate. Diagnosis can be done in both live patients and deceased carriers. In live patients, samples like cerebrospinal fluid, throat swab, nasal swab, blood, and urine can be used for the diagnosis of NiV infection. Samples such as spleen, kidney and lung biopsy can be used for diagnosis in dead patients. Isolation and propagation of NiV-infected patients require enhanced biosafety level 3 and 4 facilities. A wide array of tests can be employed in the detection of NiV, including virus isolation and neutralization, immunohistochemistry, molecular and serological
assays, and enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) [22]. NiV culture can be performed using Vero cells and within three days, cytopathic effects can be observed [23].

PCR is the most sensitive and widely used method of diagnosing NiV. Several types of PCR tests have been developed for NiV detection including conventional reverse transcriptase (RT)-PCR, nested RT-PCR, and real-time RT-PCR (the most widely used test yielding a sensitivity of 1000 times more than conventional PCR) [24]. Noteworthy is the possibility of such techniques being compromised if the viral genome becomes mutated [22,24]. Although PCR is the most preferred diagnostic method, NiV-specific immunoglobulin M ELISA can be used as an alternative approach in the absence of PCR [25]. Immunohistochemical assays provide post-mortem confirmation of NiV diagnosis in fatal cases. Viral isolation and neutralization assays are employed for general confirmation of NiV and are confined to BSL-4 facilities with strict safety measures [22].

7. TREATMENT

Treatment available to infected individuals is currently limited to supportive care, as there are no approved treatments for NiV infection. Ribavirin and acyclovir have been administered during past outbreaks to treat NiV infection. Ribavirin was administered either intravenously or orally to patients presenting with NiV encephalitis in Malaysia and approximately a 36% decrease in the mortality rate was observed [26]. In Singapore, acyclovir was administered to all patients presenting with NiV encephalitis and only one case of death was reported. Although there is supporting evidence of the use of these drugs in managing NiV, their role in the treatment of NiV remains unclear [26, 27]. Recently, there have been ongoing investigations on the potency of vaccine administration and the efficacy of antiviral therapies in the treatment of NiV infection. This shows hope for a better NiV prognosis in the future [28, 29]. However, due to the increased mortality rate of NiV infection and its severe impact on community health, specific antiviral agents must be developed for the early treatment of infected individuals.

8. PREVENTION AND CONTROL
Preventive and control measures focus on proper identification of infected individuals and further isolation to contain the outbreak. Transmission of NiV from patient to health worker or caregiver can be controlled through regular hand washing and avoiding shared foods and bedding with infected patients [36,37]. It is important to wear protective personal equipment (PPE), such as face masks and gloves while handling the corpse of an infected individual to prevent contracting the virus from the infected corpse [49,38,39,40,42]. In low-resource countries with limited access to PPE, handwashing with soap and water after contact with the corpse of an infected person can provide some level of protection against the disease [30, 31]. The transmission of NiV to health workers can be mitigated by encouraging adequate handwashing practices, stringent use of PPE, and the isolation of infected patients [30].

Preventive measures, such as the bamboo skirt method, can be used to reduce date palm sap contamination. This bamboo skirt method typically involves the hanging of the pot over a bamboo skirt and covering its shaved part and mouth. Another method is the sap branch technique which involves the covering of the shaved part of the tree with branches from the same tree or with clothes or a mosquito net [32, 33]. Fruits should be properly washed and after each preparation, individuals should ensure their hands are thoroughly washed to prevent the spread of the disease [34]. Awareness campaigns can be organized in communities to educate the public on the risk factors as well as buttress the importance of strict adherence to preventive measures in containing the spread of the virus [35,43,44,47,41].

Media communication like television, radio channels, posters as well as physical-based programs can be utilized to improve awareness of the virus among different populations, especially among impoverished populations [32,59-62].

9. EFFORTS TO MITIGATE THE DISEASE:

During the 2019 outbreak in Kerala, the Union Health Minister formed a specialized team to appraise and counter the NiV outbreak. This team was formed by physicians (neurologists and Infectious disease experts), microbiologists and public health experts.[50-52] Pre-set guidelines to address the outbreak were already prepared following the experiences of previous outbreaks.[53]
The main roles and responsibilities of this team included: Addressing the diagnostic and treatment guidelines, epidemiological and risk assessment studies, containment measures, addressing the dead body disposal protocols, emergency operations activation, and reporting events to the international authorities. Veterinary experts also played a major role in identifying and sting the diseased bats. Moreover, the directorate of health in Kerala as well as the State Programme Officer of the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme put on efforts for infection control by establishing control rooms, contact tracing program, cremation guidelines, providing resources, and ensuring proper handling infected medical wastes management. To add, the Nipah cell (District Rapid Response Team), composing of public health experts as well as computers and information technology experts, developed a cyber space monitoring and worked on raising awareness through informative videos and posters. [54,55,62]

Despite all these measures to control the disease, yet a lack of specific antiviral treatments and vaccination measures still impose a high mortality risk on the population. Health authorities should focus more on clinical trials to speed up the vaccination innovation, and to emphasize more on the effectiveness of the mentioned measures taken by the government in mitigating the disease.

10. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Over the past two decades, NiV outbreaks have been recorded in several countries ranging from Malaysia, Singapore, and Bangladesh, with the most recent reports in Kerala, India. Such outbreaks have posed a significant threat to the economy and community health of affected countries owing to the high mortality and mobility rate of the NiV infection. Furthermore, expert scientists have speculated that NiV may potentially classify as the next pandemic agent after COVID-19. Consequently, it is pertinent that preparedness and sufficient awareness among the public, especially those of affected regions, are implemented to control and effectively contain NiV outbreaks. Additionally, banning the transportation of pigs in affected regions and improved hygiene practices at pig operation centres are highly recommended. Moreover, collaborative efforts should be made toward the accelerated development of specific treatment regimens to prevent any further emergence of NiV.
REFERENCES


Annals of Medicine and Surgery

The following information is required for submission. Please note that failure to respond to these questions/statements will mean your submission will be returned. If you have nothing to declare in any of these categories then this should be stated.

Please state any conflicts of interest
All authors must disclose any financial and personal relationships with other people or organisations that could inappropriately influence (bias) their work. Examples of potential conflicts of interest include employment, consultancies, stock ownership, honoraria, paid expert testimony, patent applications/registrations, and grants or other funding.

No conflicts of interest declared.

Please state any sources of funding for your research
All sources of funding should be declared as an acknowledgement at the end of the text. Authors should declare the role of study sponsors, if any, in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; and in the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. If the study sponsors had no such involvement, the authors should so state.

None.

Ethical Approval
Research studies involving patients require ethical approval. Please state whether approval has been given, name the relevant ethics committee and the state the reference number for their judgement.

Not Applicable.
Consent
Studies on patients or volunteers require ethics committee approval and fully informed written consent which should be documented in the paper.

Authors must obtain written and signed consent to publish a case report from the patient (or, where applicable, the patient's guardian or next of kin) prior to submission. We ask Authors to confirm as part of the submission process that such consent has been obtained, and the manuscript must include a statement to this effect in a consent section at the end of the manuscript, as follows: “Written informed consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this case report and accompanying images. A copy of the written consent is available for review by the Editor-in-Chief of this journal on request”.

Patients have a right to privacy. Patients' and volunteers' names, initials, or hospital numbers should not be used. Images of patients or volunteers should not be used unless the information is essential for scientific purposes and explicit permission has been given as part of the consent. If such consent is made subject to any conditions, the Editor in Chief must be made aware of all such conditions.

Even where consent has been given, identifying details should be omitted if they are not essential. If identifying characteristics are altered to protect anonymity, such as in genetic pedigrees, authors should provide assurance that alterations do not distort scientific meaning and editors should so note.

Not Applicable.

Author contribution
Please specify the contribution of each author to the paper, e.g. study concept or design, data collection, data analysis or interpretation, writing the paper, others, who have contributed in other ways should be listed as contributors.

Olivier Uwishema: Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing-review and Designing
Kamsi Olivia Muoka: Collection and assembly of data
Olivier Uwishema – Reviewed and edited the first draft, supervisor
Jack Wellington MSc (LSHTM) FGMS – Reviewed and edited the second draft.
Helen Onyeaka: Reviewed and edited the final draft, Supervisor
Christin Berjaoui and Olivier Uwishema: Worked on revision
Manuscript writing: All authors

Final approval of manuscript: All authors

Registration of Research Studies

In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki 2013, all research involving human participants has to be registered in a publicly accessible database. Please enter the name of the registry and the unique identifying number (UIN) of your study.

You can register any type of research at http://www.researchregistry.com to obtain your UIN if you have not already registered. This is mandatory for human studies only. Trials and certain observational research can also be registered elsewhere such as: ClinicalTrials.gov or ISRCTN or numerous other registries.

1. Name of the registry: **Not Applicable**

2. Unique Identifying number or registration ID: **Not Applicable**

3. Hyperlink to your specific registration (must be publicly accessible and will be checked): **Not Applicable**

Guarantor
The Guarantor is the one or more people who accept full responsibility for the work and/or the conduct of the study, had access to the data, and controlled the decision to publish

Olivier Uwishema : Principal Investigator (PI)