

Rotavirus crisis, what crisis?



By [Bhekisisa Mncube](#)

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There is a school of thought in journalism literature that says journalists must write "news to use" not titillation and gossip.

South Africa has recently been inundated with reports of an outbreak of diarrhoea in Durban inadvertently caused by a Rotavirus.

The story made it twice to the national newspaper The Times, once in the Mercury including syndication to other titles nationally. The story was a lead in at least two national television stations including the public broadcaster.

Reports vary, at first The Times (July 8) report said more than 100 young children have been infected by the diarrhoea and vomiting bug, Rotavirus.

Research

The Times further quoted an unnamed medical journal that reported that more than 500,000 children under five are killed by the virus globally.

As of January 2012, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that globally 453,000 child deaths occurred during 2008 due to Rotavirus infection. Five countries (India, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia and Pakistan) accounted for more than half of all Rotavirus deaths under age five in 2008. Since the spread of the vaccine, fewer deaths have been reported and WHO no longer keeps global stats.

The Times report further mentioned that at least 48 patients were being treated for acute diarrhoea at King Edward VIII Hospital, two of whom have died, and 39 at Mahatma Gandhi Hospital, in Phoenix. It concluded that there were 137 cases, which were said to be severe, were reported on the same day.

In less than 48 hours according to the unattributed sentence in The Times (July 10) report it said that as many as 40% of children admitted to hospital with diarrhoea have tested positive for Rotavirus, apparently the leading cause of severe diarrhoea and dehydration in infants and children worldwide.

In all fairness these reports contained untruths and half-truths.

The Mercury reported 30 deaths and 700 more cases.

Missing information

So the numbers as reported in the media don't tally up in keeping with doctrine of an outbreak, which mean that according to the American Centre for Disease Control an occurrence of more cases of disease than normal within a specific place or group of people over a given period of time

This hullabaloo is unnecessary. It is a classic case of what Stanley Cohen, author of a sociological study about youth culture and media aptly named "Folk Devils and Moral Panics". Cohen said moral panic occurs when "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests".

Those who start the panic, in this case the SA media are moral entrepreneurs - they fear a threat to the prevailing social order. The public health system is therefore regarded as "folk devils" threatening the social order.

The truth is less sensational; the only cases of Rotavirus confirmed according the National Institute for Communicable Diseases were taken from a sample of a 242 specimens in June 2013, of which only 55% of cases were due to Rotavirus.

None of the media stories record that the Rotavirus is community acquired disease due to the lack of basic hygiene. Rotavirus virus is transmitted by the faecal-oral route. It infects and damages the cells that line the small intestine and causes gastroenteritis.

In simple English, parents of the infected and affected children are to be blamed for the so-called outbreak.

Speaking to SAnews recently, Deputy Head of Communicable Disease Services in eThekweni Municipality, Dr Ayo Olowolagba said: "There are no antibiotics to treat Rotavirus. Our best bet is to improve our sanitation, personal hygiene as well as environmental factors associated with urban living. In cases of an outbreak, Oral Rehydration Therapy Corner (ORT) remains our last line of defence".

Advice for parents section

None of the media stories had a simple side bar to explain that parents can treat their children at home. According to the experts if a child passes two to three loose stools within a few hours, parents are urged to immediately treat them with oral hydration solution - salt, water and sugar, before taking them to the nearest clinic. Parents and care givers can refer to page 11 of their child's Road to Health booklet for feeding recommendation for diarrhoea.

If the child does develop acute diarrhoea, a simple solution of 8 level teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt per litre of clean water (or pre-packed oral rehydration solution (ORS)) obtainable from the clinic or pharmacy is adequate for rehydration. A child under 2 years needs at least 1-2 cups of ORS after each watery stool, while children over 2 years may need more ORS after each watery stool.

As soon as these warning signs of severe dehydration including the child being lethargic, loss of elasticity of the skin, sunken eyes and no tears when crying. If these signs appear, the child needs to be taken to a medical facility immediately.

Just for the records only 30 deaths have been confirmed, and there are in excess of 700 cases of diarrhoea - these have not been confirmed to be as a result of Rotavirus. And, the cases are isolated and contained in few areas in Durban (Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu, Umlazi and Mayville).

Vaccinations

There was also a little matter of a so-called failed vaccine. It is true that a few casualties who had been vaccinated still succumb to the disease. The unpalatable truth is that although the vaccine is available in all public health institutions, it has not been routinely taken by parents for their infants which then exacerbate cases of diarrhoea.

Dr Ayo Olowolagba confirmed that the vaccine has a 77% efficacy. According to experts at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases: "We have documented those children who receive the Rotavirus vaccine is 60-70% less likely to develop severe Rotavirus disease. As such, it is important that parents ensure their children receive vaccines timorously, to optimise protection of their children. Without the Rotavirus vaccine having been included in the South African immunisation program, the current outbreaks would in all likelihood have been severe than is being experienced".

So, the little sanctimonious media moral entrepreneurs overlooked the basic facts in a rush for yet another sensational headline/story.

Before we know it, it will be called another Jacob Zuma 'gate' scandal.

ABOUT BHEKISISA MNCUBE

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