

BEYOND OUR BORDERS

The 'Beyond our Borders' column focuses on selected and current international diseases that may affect South Africans travelling abroad. Numbers correspond to Figure 6 on page 8

Anthrax: Zimbabwe

The Provincial Development coordinator of the Civil Protection Unit (CPU) confirmed that at least two people were admitted with anthrax symptoms in the week of 12 October 2020. This occurred in the city of Chipinge, in Manicaland Province, Zimbabwe, where officials from the Division of Veterinary Services in the Ministry of Agriculture moved into rapid action dispatching a response team to vaccinate local livestock. The outbreak has reportedly claimed dozens of cattle in Chipinge rural. The threat to human life is heightened by suspicion that local butcheries are stocking the infected beef for resale. This problem is further compounded by ongoing social economic difficulties in Zimbabwe which have, in some cases, caused hunger-stricken locals to consume beef from ailing cattle.

The situation is now thought to be under control following the rapid response, which included educating the population on anthrax as well as vaccinating livestock. The provincial response emphasised the importance of constant surveillance of disease as well as collaborative efforts with local structures and other departments (in this case the veterinary department, which aided in identifying hotspots). The outbreak has extended to at least four other cities in the province, where 15 cattle have perished. Chipinge District is a designated anthrax zone where the movement of cattle is prohibited and livestock receive annual vaccination to curb the spread of disease. The annual vaccination is now due and aims to target 87 000 cattle, a significant rise from the 14 000 vaccinated last year. However, due to logistical difficulties in rounding up all local cattle, gaps are anticipated in the annual vaccinations.

Syphilis: USA

In addition to battling the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and pre-emptively preparing for the onset of flu season, health officials in south-central Oklahoma, USA, are battling an outbreak of syphilis. According to data from the state department of health's sexual health and harm-reduction service, between 2014 and 2018, Oklahoma has experienced a more than eight-fold increase in the number of syphilis cases amongst women. In addition, they have seen nearly 3 times more babies born with congenital syphilis.

In Carter County, near the Texas border in central Oklahoma, public health officials are still experiencing severe outbreaks despite mitigation efforts. Carter County is home to Ardmore, one of the state's worst-hit areas in the opioid epidemic. Public officials have seen a burgeoning influx of heroin, which many attribute to a crackdown on opioid distribution. It is

thought that the surge in drug use has likely caused the rise in the county's syphilis diagnosis, as dealers often accept sex in lieu of cash payments. Response to the syphilis outbreak, much like the COVID-19 response, requires contact tracers and infection specialists. Due to the needs of the pandemic, these resources have been diverted to COVID-19 response, resulting in an impaired response to the syphilis outbreak. The linkage of illicit drug use and syphilis transmission is reminiscent of the increase in syphilis among heterosexuals during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, when the practice of trading sex with multiple partners for drugs, especially crack cocaine, played a major role in the transmission of syphilis. Under these circumstances, the identities of sex partners are often unknown, which weakens the traditional syphilis-control strategy of partner notification.

Botulism: Italy

More than 30 people have required hospital treatment for suspected botulism intoxication in Cefalu, a city in northern Sicily, Italy. The patients were all workers of the same company and initial investigations point towards a shared meal of a salad containing tuna, tomato and mozzarella, resulting in a total of 35 people presenting to their local emergency department (ED) for aid.

Currently, 24 patients are admitted with seven requiring intensive care. Samples were taken from patients in the ED and sent for laboratory confirmation at the Istituto

Superiore di Sanita in Rome. Patients who have been discharged (currently 10 in total) have been monitored via telephonic follow up by the Poison Control Centre. In a statement released to Italian media, the company said that it had provided assistance for hospitalised employees as well as their families. In addition to the internal investigations being conducted by the company, external investigations into the catering company are also being facilitated by health officials in Palermo as well as by local police. Interestingly, data from the National Reference Centre for Botulism (CNRB) marks Italy as the capital of botulism cases in Europe.

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Rift Valley fever: Mauritania

The Mauritanian government has reported three deaths (from a total of five identified cases) due to a haemorrhagic fever known as Rift Valley fever. The Ministry of Health, as well as the Ministry of Rural Development, reported that there were also several cases in livestock. The two ministries also confirmed that directives had been issued to the surveillance teams and control measures had been put in place after the announcement of the first case. These measures included assisting technical teams with tools to assess the situation

as well as to ensure the readiness of team members in facing emergency situations. The ministries also advised the public to follow precautionary measures including, heating milk before consumption, properly cooking meat, isolating animals from human housing, washing hands with soap after touching animals, burning and burying dead animal bodies and sleeping under mosquito nets. Reporting of any suspect cases as well as early presentation to a health facility was also encouraged.

Diphtheria: Vietnam

The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a travel notice recently for Vietnam due to a diphtheria outbreak. Provincial health authorities have reported 198 cases since the beginning of 2020. This compares to 41 cases during the same period in 2019. Of the 198 cases, 172 have been reported in the Central Highland region, 22 cases in central provinces and four cases in southern provinces. Four deaths have been reported, and

161 out of the 198 cases were unvaccinated. The World Health Organization surveillance data estimates the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP3) coverage to have been 75% in 2018. This is lower than the estimated 90% in the preceding four years. In response to the outbreak, the Vietnam Ministry of Health has launched a vaccination campaign for affected provinces and implemented further measures to control the spread of the disease.

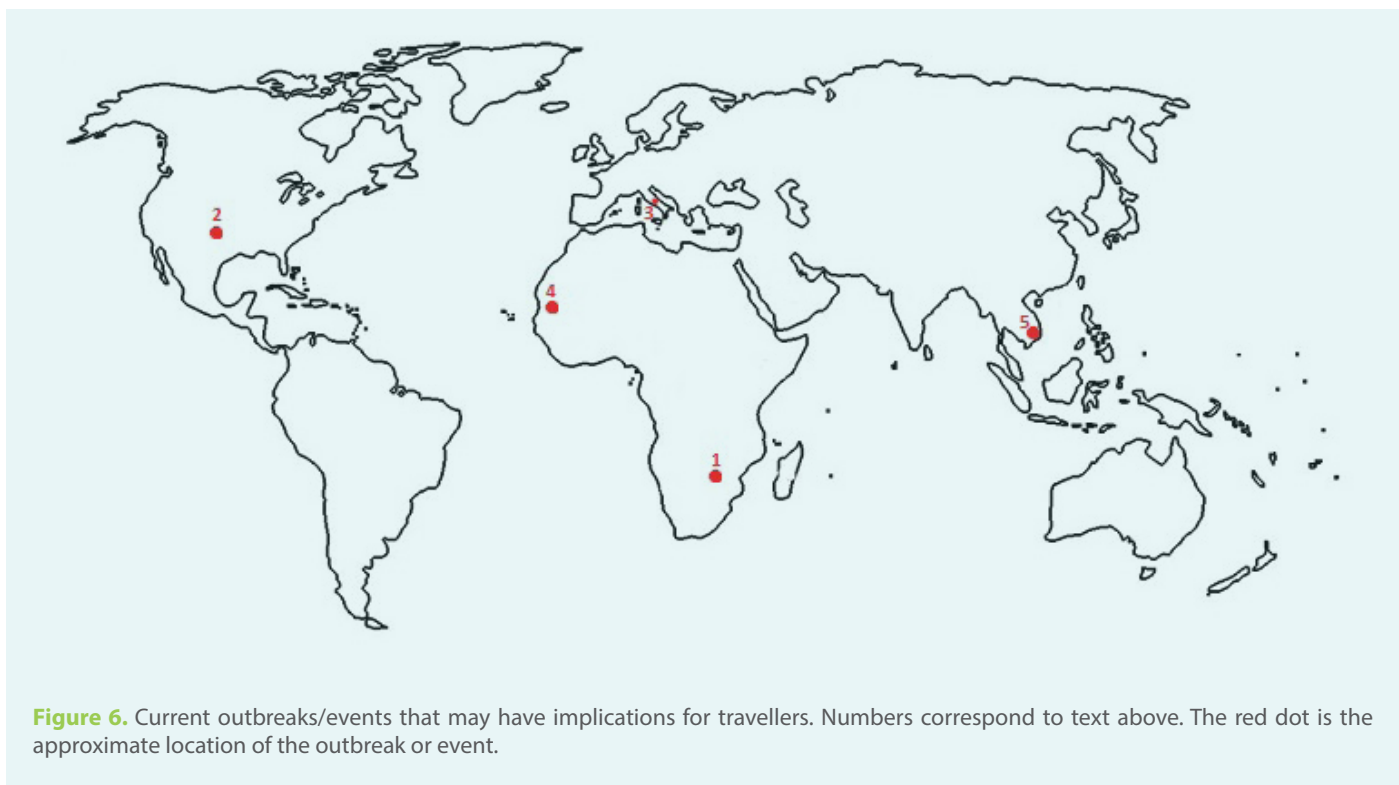


Figure 6. Current outbreaks/events that may have implications for travellers. Numbers correspond to text above. The red dot is the approximate location of the outbreak or event.