

Mpox Outbreak in Congo: The Lancet's Call For a Vaccination Strategy



Since the beginning of 2024, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has been grappling with an alarming mpox outbreak, resulting in over 18,000 suspected cases and more than 600 deaths. The outbreak, declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern as of August 14, has seen the emergence of a new strain, clade 1b, which is spreading rapidly, particularly in the eastern provinces. The outbreak is exacerbated by syndemics involving other health crises such as cholera, natural disasters, and forced migration due to socio-political instability.

Transmission and New Challenges

The new clade 1b strain appears to be primarily transmitted through sexual contact, raising concerns about its spread among vulnerable populations. Reports indicate an increase in cases in both endemic and previously unaffected provinces. Neighbouring countries are also starting to report infections. The spread of the virus is compounded by the instability in the region, where population movements due to violence and unrest create ideal conditions for the virus to proliferate.

Vaccination as a Key Response

Vaccination is critical to the DRC's strategy to combat the mpox outbreak. Two third-generation vaccines, MVA-BN and LC16, have been approved, but logistical challenges hinder their widespread distribution. Priority groups for vaccination include healthcare workers, professional sex workers, and men who have sex with men. Displaced populations, who are highly vulnerable due to ongoing conflict, must also be included in vaccination efforts.

Addressing Complex Needs

The crisis underscores the need for a multi-sectoral approach to vaccination and public health. With the displacement crisis set to worsen, vaccination programs must adapt to the needs of both urban and camp-dwelling displaced people. Understanding the unique risks these populations face is crucial for implementing an effective vaccination campaign that prevents the further spread of the virus.

The mpox outbreak in the DRC is a severe public health crisis compounded by political and socio-economic challenges. Immediate, coordinated action, including widespread vaccination and targeted public health strategies, is critical to containing the outbreak and preventing further loss of life.

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