

NATIONAL MEDICINE

# 'Disease of poverty': Malaria 'back with a vengeance' in Australia's closest neighbours

By Kate Aubusson  
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Malaria rates have soared among some of Australia's closest neighbours as complacency risks undoing a decade of sustained and extraordinary progress towards eradicating the disease, experts warn.



The world's foremost malaria scientists, clinicians and activists, policymakers and national leaders will meet at the inaugural [Malaria World Congress in Melbourne](#) as the World Health Organisation (WHO) declares progress to combat the [potentially fatal disease has stalled](#).



Malaria outreach in Pailin Province, west Cambodia, where malaria drug resistance is of major international concern.

Photo: John Rae

In 2016 there were an estimated 216 million malaria cases globally.

Papua New Guinea recorded a staggering 400 per cent surge in malaria between 2010 and 2016, [WHO figures show](#), with an estimated 1.4 million malaria cases and 3000 deaths in 2016.

Solomon Islands recorded a 40 per cent rise in cases of the disease transmitted by the bite of mosquitoes infected with a plasmodium parasite. The rise was partly due to inadequate access to services and improved surveillance, according to WHO.

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Drug-resistant malaria in some parts of Vietnam and Cambodia was responsible for 30 per cent and 60 per cent treatment failure rates respectively.



Infected mosquitoes in some regions of Vietnam and Cambodia have become resistant to traditional insecticides used in bed nets.

Photo: John Rae

Malaria kills one child every two minutes globally. The vector-borne disease is transmitted via the bite of a mosquito infected with plasmodium parasites.

The WHO target of eliminating malaria by 2030 was “in serious danger of not being achieved”, said founder and co-convenor of the Congress, infectious diseases boffin

Professor Brendan Crabb ahead of the Congress that aims to put a global spotlight on the potentially deadly disease.

The surge in cases in Melanesia and the Mekong region needed to be considered in the context of a decade of consistent gains, and alarmingly high rates of malaria in sub-Saharan Africa, said Professor Crabb, also chief executive at the Burnet Institute.

The incidence rate of malaria decreased by 18 per cent globally (76 to 63 cases per 1000 population at risk) between 2010 and 2016.

But success breeds complacency.



New innovations and technologies are needed to eliminate malaria in the region by 2030.

*Photo: John Rae*

“Malaria can often be the victim of its own success,” Professor Crabb said of the “disease of poverty”.

“As you make progress, health departments tend to focus on other health issues and as soon as you do that with malaria, it comes back with a vengeance.”

The rise in prevalence coincides with economic upheaval in PNG and significant cuts to public health expenditure. PNG is also grappling with a polio outbreak – 18 years after the country was declared polio-free.

“It doesn’t take long for malaria to come back if you take your foot off the public health accelerator,” Professor Crabb said.

In Sri Lanka in 1963, the number of malaria cases recorded was 17. Six years later there were 300,000 cases. In 2017, Sri Lanka was declared malaria-free.

“It’s not too late to redouble our efforts,” Professor Crabb said ahead of the Congress that will focus on improving vector-control, diagnostics and treatment strategies, as well as interlinking agencies and initiatives.

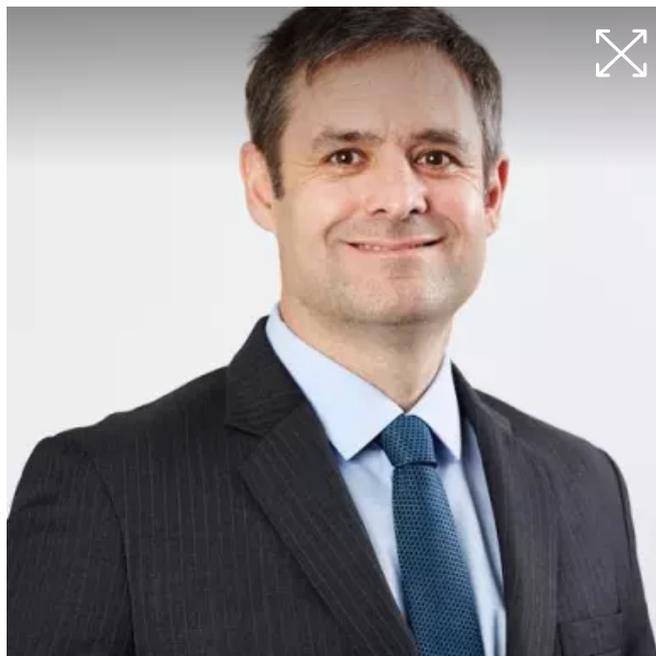
The current \$2.5 billion in funding for malaria intervention each year globally fell well short of WHO’s \$6-9 billion needed to eliminate the disease, Professor Crabb said.

Australia has committed [\\$220 million between 2017 and 2019](#) to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, which provides 50 per cent of all funding for malaria treatment.

Major innovation – in the order of a highly effective vaccine – was needed to quell malaria in sub-Saharan Africa, Professor Crabb said. Up to 90 per cent of all malaria cases were in Africa in 2016.

In South East Asia and the Pacific, current prevention and treatment strategies – including insecticides and bed nets – needed to be turbo-charged, he said.

A relatively new anti-malarial drug, tafenoquine – currently under review for approval by Australian and US drug regulators – “has the potential to revolutionise the way we treat latent malaria”, said CEO Asia-Pacific Leaders Malaria Alliance (APLMA), Dr Ben Rolfe.



CEO Asia- Pacific Leaders Malaria Alliance (APLMA)  
Dr Ben Rolfe

*Photo: Supplied*

Tafenoquine is taken over two consecutive days, compared to 12 days for the first-line drug primaquine (increasingly ineffective against drug-resistant malaria), and should improve treatment compliance, Dr Rolfe said.

Dr Rolfe said PNG should be commended for its action against malaria “but we need the global community to get behind this ... and we can’t do it with existing tools”.

APLMA and Unitaid – an international organisation that invested in innovations to combat malaria and other communicable diseases – were spearheading efforts to accelerate the introduction of new technologies to affected areas, including next-generation mosquito nets, indoor sprays and aerial insecticides that were effective against mosquitoes resistant to traditional insecticides.

“These simple tools need to become more dynamic,” said executive director of Unitaid Lelio Marmora.

But there were many bottlenecks preventing new innovations reaching the communities that most needed them, Mr Marmora said.

“There are many problems arising right now [that hamper efforts to eliminate malaria, including] political commitment and issues with funding and making sure we maintain momentum,” he said.



Executive director of Unitaid Lelio Marmora

*Photo: Supplied*

Unitaid and APLMA will announce at the congress next week, a new “vector control platform” for the Asia Pacific to enable greater networking between governments, NGOs, start-ups, financiers, researchers and aid workers to fast-track new tools for the prevention, detection and treatment of malaria.

The platform will also focus on overcoming bureaucratic red tape to rapidly deliver any effective new tools to at-risk communities, Mr Mamora said.



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**Kate Aubusson**



Kate Aubusson is Health Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald.

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