

RESEARCH

Alarm at rising rate of deadly TB in SA (The Burger Aug 17, 2008) - by Bobby Jordan in Die Burger newspaper, Cape Town, South Africa.

New medical research suggests South Africa is faced with several new strains of dangerous drug-resistant tuberculosis for which there is no known cure. The latest findings suggest that, despite a massive TB control programme, the government is losing the battle against the killer disease, known as XDR-TB (extensively drug-resistant). The number of XDR-TB patients now poses an international health threat and has prompted intervention from the World Health Organisation. The new strains identified in a study of 699 drug-resistant patients is the latest troubling insight into a disease that either does not respond to drugs at all, or only reacts very slowly.

One sixth of the world's XDR-TB cases are now in SA, new figures show, and there are growing concerns that the country may be exporting the epidemic, thereby disrupting disease-control efforts elsewhere. "The importance of this finding is that the population structure of XDR-TB is not confined to a single genotype; in other words, XDR-TB is emerging independently in different regions of South Africa," said one of the study's authors, Professor Rob Warren from Stellenbosch University's health sciences faculty. The scale of South Africa's XDR-TB problem has prompted major international concern. "South Africa clearly has an extremely serious problem," said the head of the global Stop TB programme, Dr Paul Nunn.

In addition to the latest research report, the Sunday Times this week established that: The WHO has set up a permanent office in Pretoria to assist the government with XDR-TB control; There is a 30% to 40% increase in the annual XDR-TB case load in SA (currently just under 1000 official cases), although it may be as high as 2000; XDR-TB has been reported in 39 SA hospitals; A detailed study of a recent XDR-TB outbreak in Tugela Ferry in KwaZulu-Natal (53 cases, 53 dead) showed that, on average, patients died within 16 days of diagnosis; Despite the huge crisis, the TB control programme has no access to thoracic (lung) surgeons in SA's state hospitals (surgery is one of the last-resort treatment options); An estimated 80% of South Africans now carry latent normal TB; and The latest research into new strains of XDR-TB (a collaboration between various universities and the National Health Laboratory Service) was based on patients from several provinces, of whom 41 (6%) were found to be resistant to the country's two main second-line TB drugs. Most of the XDR-TB strains were different from the strain identified at Tugela Ferry.

The problem is largely the result of an overburdened health service, which means TB patients are either not getting drugs or not completing their drug treatment, causing drug resistance. The national HIV epidemic has also fuelled the problem by lowering people's immunity to TB.