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P R E S S R E L E A S E

PNG facing snakebite crisis this summer

The start of the wet season in Central Province has been accompanied by an upsurge in the number of snakebite cases presenting to Port Moresby General Hospital and rural Health Centres according to the Australian Venom Research Unit's PNG-based Snakebite Expert, David Williams.

The increased demand has led to a critical shortage of life-saving antivenoms, with the Area Medical Store in Port Moresby having run out of stock. *"Antivenom supplies at Port Moresby General Hospital are extremely limited, and may run out this week"* said Mr Williams. The Department of Health has responded immediately to the emergency by placing an urgent order for more vials of the life-saving drug.

He said *"Thanks to fast action by the Health Department, more stock is on the way from Australia now, but we are urging people everywhere to be especially careful right now, as there is a risk that current supplies will run out before more arrives."*

An influx of patients has also put some pressure on hospital resources, but this has been helped enormously by the loan of two ventilators from Oil Search's Medical Department. Mr Williams praised the company for their help, saying that the swift response to a request for help last week had saved lives that would otherwise have been lost.

Over the next 2-3 months Port Moresby General Hospital is expected to see more than 70 cases of snakebite, many involving people referred by outlying Health Centres who lack the resources to provide appropriate care. *"The majority of serious bites are caused by Papuan taipans, and without antivenom or access to mechanical ventilation, bites by this species are 100% fatal."* Papuan taipans are the most common venomous snakes in southern PNG, accounting for more than 90% of snakebite emergencies. Mr Williams said that *"unfortunately taipans are often mistaken for the now rare, Papuan blacksnake and this can sometimes lead to the wrong antivenom being administered."*

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The Department of Health is currently considering the introduction of Snake Venom Detection Kits to enable patients to be treated with less expensive antivenoms that are specific to the types of venom detected by these tests. Mr Williams said that a trial of the kits last year found that they reduced hospital treatment costs by up to K13,200 per patient, and resulted in a 73% reduction in the number of snakebite patients admitted to the Intensive Care Unit.

Despite these improvements, Mr Williams is very concerned that lives may be lost if people do not take care to avoid snakebite. *“At this time of year, encounters with venomous snakes are very common, and the wet weather often makes roads impassable, causing delays in treatment.”*

“Whether they live in Port Moresby, or out in the villages, people are urged to be careful when going about their daily activities.” He said that venomous snakes often live in and around garden plots where they hunt for rodents, and suggests that people take extra care when going to or from their gardens, or when working in them. *“People need to watch where they are walking and to also be careful picking up firewood and other things off the ground.”*

They should also approach their local Health Centres for advice and information on the correct first aid for snakebite, which is the application of a firm pressure bandage combined with physical immobilisation of the patient.

Antivenom manufacturer, CSL Limited has recently produced new first aid instruction materials for PNG that have been translated into Pidgin and Motu, and the company has donated 25,000 of these waterproof treatment cards to the AVRU to teach snakebite first aid in PNG. Funding is now being sought to enable bandages to be purchased, and for the materials to be used to teach proper snakebite first aid to more than 150,000 people in high snakebite risk areas.

“The work that we are doing to improve snakebite treatment in PNG currently receives no formal funding, so the progress of individual projects relies very strongly on attracting sponsorship.” He said. A proposal to fund a National Antivenom Unit at the University of PNG which would radically improve the use of antivenom and the treatment of snakebites throughout PNG is currently with the Health Department.

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Image Caption: A deadly Papuan taipan: this species causes most of the serious snakebites in southern PNG, but is often confused with the rare Papuan blacksnake. (*Photo: David Williams*)