

Editorial

'Tropical Troubles': When falling Coconuts Aren't the Only Concern

It is with great pleasure that we introduce this special edition of the Belgian Journal of Paediatrics, dedicated to the intricate realm of tropical paediatrics. As guest editors, we reflect on our past years with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and other organizations, where we witnessed firsthand the inseparable bond between tropical paediatrics and humanitarian work. While we are currently more in Belgium than in the tropics, we find fulfillment in continuing to contribute to the education of healthcare workers in the tropics and to Belgian medical staff dealing with tropical diseases.

In recent years, the number of paediatricians with experience in infectiology and travel medicine has increased slightly. However, for the majority, the field of tropical medicine remains a bit mysterious. It is precisely this gap in knowledge and awareness that motivates the publication of this special issue. Publishing an issue on tropical medicine in summer is timely, considering the surge in travel during this season.

The 'tropics' refer to the region of the Earth around the equator (encompassing the area between the Tropic of Cancer in the Northern Hemisphere and the Tropic of Capricorn in the Southern Hemisphere). The subtropics are the adjacent areas, also characterized by warm temperatures and high humidity. The geography of the tropics profoundly influences the health landscape of these regions. Pathogens like dengue, malaria and many parasites thrive in tropical climates with mosquitos and humid soils, but diseases like malnutrition and TB are also fueled by factors like overcrowding and poverty, that are prevalent in many Low- and Middle Income Countries (LMIC), but on the rise in Belgium as well.

Originally we also invited people to send articles on diseases like sickle cell anaemia that are more prevalent in 'tropical regions' and that we see more often when working in LMIC. But after some remarks and reflection, we realised that considering sickle cell disease as a tropical condition might not align with a "woke" perspective as it could perpetuate harmful stereotypes and overlooks its current global prevalence and the diverse populations affected by this genetic disorder.

As we consider the ecological impact of travel, it is imperative to keep the environmental footprint of air travel in the back of our minds. While air travel facilitates global connectivity, it also contributes to carbon emissions that impact the very environments we seek to explore and protect. Another factor to consider is the widespread use of unecological sunscreens (containing chemicals known to be harmful to marine life, such as oxybenzone and octinoxate), while mineral-based UV filters like zinc oxide and titanium dioxide are available.

Vector-borne diseases remain a significant threat in (sub)tropical regions, but also more and more in European areas (cfr. the articles on West Nile and 'travelling with children' in this special edition). This underscores the importance of preventive measures such as DEET and other mosquito repellents. However, it is crucial to exercise caution in their application, mindful of the potential long-term effects on human health, including the risk of endocrine disruption. Balancing the benefits of protection against mosquito-borne illnesses with potential risks requires a nuanced approach, taking into account other measures like long sleeves and sleeping under an impregnated bednet.

We are delighted to present a new Belgian Paediatric Malaria protocol, developed collaboratively with leading experts in the field. This edition also features updates on travelling with children, alongside insightful articles on emerging tropical diseases such as West Nile virus, Pott's disease, Leishmania, and neurocysticercosis. Furthermore, we end with the groundbreaking research of Bieke Tack's PhD on one of the most significant causes of bacteremia in sub-Saharan Africa, Non-Typhoid Salmonella. We extend our heartfelt appreciation to all contributors who have generously shared their expertise and insights in this edition.

Warm (tropical) regards,

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