

Cholera in Benue State

Benue is one of the states in the African country of Nigeria. It has a population of about three million people. It is an area full of rivers and is an important area for agriculture – often called the breadbasket of Nigeria – growing crops such as potatoes, cassava, soya bean and corn.

At first when people were ill, it was thought that they had gastro-enteritis, a very serious and unpleasant illness which gives you a very upset stomach and diarrhoea. However, it turned out to be even worse: people were ill with cholera. Most of those affected were adults who died at home without going into the hospital.



What is cholera?

Cholera is an infectious disease caused by bacteria that gets into water. Symptoms include diarrhoea, stomach craps and vomiting. The illness also makes its victims become very dehydrated and it is this dehydration that kills many people. Most people who have treatment for the disease recover.

Causes of the epidemic

1. The cause of this epidemic was traced to a shortage of water, which led the people in these areas to fetch their drinking water from the River Benue. This river is polluted with all sorts of rubbish. Also, most of the houses in these areas do not have toilet facilities though some of them have latrines. This means that sewage gets into the water and makes it dirty and unsafe to drink.

2. Sadly, a normal practice for some households was to dump their rubbish into the streets. All of this ended up in the river making the water very polluted.

3. Women are not trained in personal hygiene practices. They need education about keeping cooking pots and utensils free from germs, particularly from flies.

The Benue State Government set up a committee which visited the areas and those who were in the hospitals. The committee directed the Water Board to supply water in water tankers to the areas affected by the disease. The Nigerian government agreed to pay the hospital bills where this was necessary. The committee also strongly advised people to keep their environment clean.

Prevention measures

There were no proper measures put in place to avoid this epidemic occurring again or preventing it from getting worse. Although the Government did provide clean water in tankers to those areas affected, and offered to pay medical bills of those who were ill, these were not long term solutions to the problems of poor hygiene.

What needs to be done

A committee, made up of local government officials and water and health experts, recommended the following measures to prevent further outbreaks of cholera:

- To train people, especially women, on safe hygiene practices such as:
 - How to treat water before drinking and to know the difference between safe and unsafe water.
 - Effective hand washing – when it is important and how often to do it
- To train people about safe sewage and waste disposal.
- To train people, especially women, on how to handle food to avoid it being contaminated before serving to people
- To provide a steady supply of clean water to avoid the use of polluted water.
- To build latrines a safe distance away from water sources to keep water clean and safe.