Chagas Disease in Argentina

Chagas disease represents a large economic burden for many Latin American states as it affects many rural, impoverished areas. Policies beginning in the 1990s reduced colonies of the vector insects and screened the population for epidemiological data. While countries like Argentina have put in over 20 years of work to reduce Chagas disease, recurring outbreaks in the neglected Gran Chaco region have impeded efforts to eliminate transmission in Latin America. Estimates in 2009 suspected Chagas prevalence in rural northern Argentina to be 1.7% for the region.

PAHO Goals

1. Elimination of transmission of Chagas disease in all sub-regions of the Americas by 2015
   - Steps:
     - Eliminate domestic triatomine species
     - Screen 100% of blood donors
     - Encourage safe food handling

2. Reduction of morbidity and mortality associated with Chagas disease
   - Steps:
     - Increase research
     - Provide inclusive healthcare programs
     - Prevent congenital Chagas disease.

Summary

American trypanosomiasis, more commonly known as Chagas disease, has been a neglected tropical disease for decades. Endemic to all of Latin America, Chagas disease is found most frequently in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Columbia, Venezuela, and Central America. The disease is caused by the parasite Trypanosoma cruzi carried by an insect vector. Chagas is primarily transmitted through contact with the vector, but it can also be transmitted via blood transfusions from an infected person and congenitally from mother to child. The disease has both an acute phase and a chronic phase, and if left untreated may develop into a life-long disease that can be fatal.

The Disease

The Acute Phase

95% of acute cases of Chagas are not detected because the symptoms are often flu-like and eventually subside. Roman’s sign is one indicator of Chagas disease infection.

The Chronic Phase

Research shows that 50-60% of people infected with Chagas disease remain in the indeterminate form for life but at any point there can be an onset of clinical symptoms.

Chagas Disease in the U.S.

Chagas disease may affect as many as 300,000 individuals in the U.S. but has garnered very little recognition. Many immigrants living in the United States unknowingly have chronic Chagas disease. The United States is being forced to notice this neglected disease and take part in its control and prevention. While programs in Latin America successfully control outbreaks of Chagas, the persistence of the Chagas vector and lack of treatment for T. cruzi represent a global health threat. This threat will lead to new political and social challenges for the United States, and must be followed with policies for treatment and prevention.

Policy Recommendations

- The FDA should ensure that all blood donations are being screened for Chagas disease.
- Recommendations should be made within both the OB/GYN and Pediatric communities to test mothers coming from endemic regions and newborns.
- Physicians should partake in continuing education on Chagas disease to understand the risks, signs, and treatment options.
- Local community activists within the Hispanic community should distribute pamphlets on Chagas disease and encourage individuals to seek health care early.