

“Honorary Biomedical Sciences & Health Information Lecture Series”



THE CONUNDRUM OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH: A REVIEW OF THE DEVASTATING IMPACT OF EL NIÑO, AND ITS MANAGEMENT, IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

Banquet Speaker

By

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Abstract: El Niño is the popular name for the “warming phase” of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), which occurs every three to seven years. During an El Niño event, the surface temperatures across the Pacific Ocean can increase by 1–3°F or more, over a few months, to several years. La Niña is the cooling phase of the ENSO. The current El Niño event of 2015-2016 has brought severe drought to the eastern and southern African sub-region, with devastating health impact across several countries, and exerting severe strain on their health systems. A resurgence of cases and deaths from diarrheal diseases, mainly cholera, has been recorded in Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, Zanzibar and Zimbabwe. A disastrous epidemic of yellow fever is raging in Angola, the first of its kind since 1988. Outbreaks of typhoid have been reported in Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The transmission of HIV/AIDS and TB, not necessarily linked to the availability or not of water, could rise in this sub-region that is the global epicenter of the pandemic. A major driver of this rise would be the non-adherence by patients to AIDS and TB medication, linked to the lack of food, and to the closure of health facilities with no water. La Niña follows El Niño, bringing with it significant floods and major surges in the transmission of malaria and other water-borne diseases. This is already evident in some of the countries of the sub-region, such as Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda. The countries of the sub-region are poorly prepared and ill-equipped to manage El Niño.

Key words: El Niño La Niña, El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO), drought, health systems, diarrheal diseases, typhoid, yellow fever, food insecurity, HIV/AIDS/TB