



Epidemiologist says notion that immigrants are bringing disease is myth

Popular mindset perpetuates this link

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WASHINGTON - WASHINGTON — A Texas epidemiologist said Central American children crossing the southwest border pose little if any threat when it comes to spreading disease.

Exotic ailments aren't coming to Texas with the wave of unaccompanied minors crossing the border, Dr. Peter Hotez said Wednesday on Capitol Hill. The ailments are already in Texas, which is part of a tropical-disease hot spot.

“Tropical diseases are surprisingly widespread in Texas and the Gulf Coast,” Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at the Baylor College of Medicine, said at the Ninth Annual Border Health Conference. “They're first and foremost diseases of poverty.”

Overall, about 10 million Americans — all living in extreme poverty — suffer from tropical diseases such as dengue fever, which has emerged in Houston, Hotez said.

That's why Hotez gets “a bit miffed” when he hears incorrect talk that the children are bringing disease, he said at the conference.

Immigrants to the United States have been linked to disease in the popular mindset since the 1600s and have even come under fire from ridiculous claims of mental deficiency, said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

The more than 52,000 child migrants taken into custody at the border were much discussed at the conference sponsored by the Texas Medical Association's Border Health Caucus.

The caucus represents more than 9,000 TMA members from county medical societies in the border region and El Paso, Bexar and Nueces counties.

Health issues among the Central American children so far have included dehydration, upper-respiratory infections, allergies, skin abrasions, lice and scabies, according to a Border Health Caucus fact sheet. One case of H1N1 flu was reported, as well as three cases of tuberculosis.

The children are coming mostly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, where vaccination rates exceed or come just below the United States' 94 percent rate.

Physicians on a transient disease panel didn't believe anything out of the ordinary has been reported among the unaccompanied minors.

A San Antonio public health official said children he saw recently at a detention center on Lackland Air Force Base were receiving excellent medical care.

The center houses about 1,200 children at any time with 50 to 100 leaving daily, said Dr. Thomas L. Schlenker, director of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District.

"There haven't been any exotic diseases," said Schlenker, a pediatrician. "There have been some children who have become seriously ill with pneumonia."

Probably because they were run down, some children landed in intensive care while suffering from very treatable, garden variety pneumonia, he said.

In general the children have had a rough time, he said.

"They are skinny, awkward, oftentimes bewildered children," Schlenker said.

The most common reason they're upset is they miss their mother or father, who they probably haven't seen in a long time, he said.

Medical workers "believe they've been able to help a lot of these kids just by listening to them," Schlenker said.

He visited the center Monday to do TB testing on three children who might have been exposed to it, Schlenker said, adding "TB is something we deal with every day."