



Physicians debunk claims of disease at the border

Migrant children do not pose health threat

By: Trish Choate
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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, Dr. Peter Hotez said last week 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.

Given the presence of tropical disease in the United States already, Hotez said he gets "a bit miffed" when he hears that the children are bringing in diseases.

Hotez would probably be miffed about Rep. Phil Gingrey's letter raising concerns about "reports of" illegal child migrants "carrying deadly diseases" such as ebola, dengue fever, swine flu and tuberculosis.

"Many of the children who are coming across the border also lack basic vaccinations," Gingrey, a physician and Georgia Republican, wrote in a July 7 letter to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Gingrey's ebola mention [earned a "Pants on Fire" rating from Politifact](#). A case of the ebola virus in a human has never been reported outside of Africa.

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.

Health issues among the Central American children so far have included dehydration, upper-respiratory infections, allergies, skin abrasions, lice and scabies, according to a conference handout from the Border Health Caucus.

The group includes more than 9,000 Texas Medical Association members from county medical societies in the border region and El Paso, Bexar and Nueces counties.

In addition, a case of H1N1 flu was reported at Lackland, as well as four confirmed cases of tuberculosis among the children in Texas this year to date.

Physicians on a transient disease panel at the conference, including Hotez and Dr. Thomas L. Schlenker, didn't believe anything out of the routine has been reported among the unaccompanied minors.

"TB is something we deal with every day," said Schlenker, director of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District. He visited a detention center at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio last week to do TB testing on three children who might have been exposed.

In Texas, 1,222 cases of tuberculosis were reported in 2013, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Nationwide, 9,588 cases were reported in 2013, according to the CDC.

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

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

H1N1 or swine flu caused a global pandemic in 2009, but it is now a regular human flu virus circulating seasonally, according to the CDC. The CDC warned about a risk of H1N1 for the 2013-2014 flu season, and the current flu shot includes a vaccine against H1N1 and two other flu viruses.

As for vaccinations, the approximately 52,000 children who have crossed the border since September are coming mostly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras where vaccination rates for recommended vaccines exceed or fall just below the United States' 94 percent rate, according to the handout, "Central American Immigrant Border Crossings Shine Light on Public Health."

Schlenker, who toured the Lackland facility, said children there are receiving excellent medical care.

The detention center houses about 1,200 children at any time with 50 to 100 leaving daily, 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.