

“Beyond School Books” – a podcast series on education in emergencies.

Educating against cholera in Haiti

6 January 2011 – In the lead up to the one year anniversary of the earthquake, UNICEF podcast moderator Amy Costello spoke with Dr. Ralph Ternier, Director of Community Care and Support with Zanmi Lasante/Partners in Health, on the impact of the cholera epidemic on education and children.

Bio:

Ralph Ternier, MD, earned his medical degree in 2002 from the State University Medical School of Haiti, where he was born and raised. After completing his internship at the Partners In Health Clinic at Belladere in Central Haiti, Dr. Ternier became Director of the HIV/TB/STD Program there in 2003 and was appointed Medical Director in 2004. In this role, his responsibilities include overseeing clinical services for more than 65,000 patients. He is also involved in research on the efficacy of HIV and TB testing, treatment, and prevention and has twice presented his research at the International AIDS Conference. Following the catastrophic January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Dr. Ternier undertook leadership of repatriation initiatives that returned home hundreds of Haitians displaced to the Dominican Republic. Recently, he was honored as a Global Health Delivery Fellow by Harvard Medical School and Brigham and Women’s Hospital. Dr. Ternier is a scholarship recipient for a Masters in Public Health (Healthcare and System Management) from the Ministry of Health and the University of Montreal. Zanmi Lasante (Partners in Health in Creole) is PIH’s flagship project. Ralph was recently promoted to Director of Community Care and Support, for Partners in Health/Zanmi Lasante (PIH/ZL).

Transcript

Amy Costello: Dr. Ternier, tell me, what kind of impact has cholera epidemic had on children there?

Dr. Ralph Ternier: “The fact is in rural Haiti usually children they are left by themselves, usually because parents go to plantations to cultivate. But now what is happening, the parents are at the hospital and they have nobody to look after them. So the children will be infected as well.”

Amy Costello: “And are the children being affected as well by poor sanitation? As I understand it, a lot of it can be prevented by basic things such as hand washing and using chlorine, those kinds of things. So are children becoming infected because they are alone and they’re not practicing proper sanitation? Or, why are they vulnerable when they are home alone?”

Dr. Ternier: "First of all there's no sanitation and then they don't have enough education to know that kind of water or that they should wash their hands. And you can go to some houses where you're never going to find something to wash your hands."

Amy Costello: "I've seen two kind of competing arguments about the best way to prevent the spread of cholera and to stop it. In one report I read an Oxfam official said 'We can stop this disease with soap, chlorine and most importantly education'. And then I read your colleague Paul Farmer from Partners in Health and he recommended that a vaccine should really be administered to everyone possible and that antibiotics should be used to treat those who are already infected. So on one hand I hear a kind of low tech approach, versus a more high tech approach which is antibiotics and vaccines. What do you think it the best way to stop this as quickly and as effectively as possible."

Dr. Ternier: "I would say that when Paul said that, Paul knows in terms of education that's going to take years to have people change the way their behave. If the people are educated and have somewhere to wash their hands, it's ok, fine, we have the solution of cholera. But I know, and Paul knows that, it's not that simple and that's why I would give Paul credit to not only count on a behavioural change that can take years to stop the cholera, [when] in a very short period [you can] have a good response with vaccines and antibiotics. Because we went to a lot of places where people ask us, 'hey you are trying to educate us, but are you giving us water, soap, sanitation?' So it's all very complex it's not as simple as soap and education."

Amy Costello: "When it comes to educating children, in some kind of classroom - whether it's in a real building made of bricks, or under tent, or in an open field - given the cholera outbreak, what are you recommending in terms of gathering many children in one small area that may not have access to sanitation? Is that ok in the midst of a cholera epidemic or do you have recommendations for school children and their families?"

Dr. Ternier: "Well, it's different from one place to another. Just last month I went to a mountain where I saw young students walking four hours to get to their school. That's the place you're going to have a lot of deaths from cholera."

Amy Costello: "A statistic I read said some 50 per cent of children only went to school before the earthquake, so it sounds like what you're talking about in the rural areas, is that there's many challenges barring children getting to school and gathering together, cholera not the least among them. That there are many other issues that need to be tackled in order to get children into school, is that what you're saying?"

Dr. Ternier: "Yes, yes yes."

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Amy Costello: "Well very interesting Dr. Ternier, with Partners in Health, Director of Community Care and Support, born and raised in Haiti, thank you so much for speaking with me today. Stay safe.

Dr. Ternier: "Thank you, I will."