

# Perspectives on KwaZulu-Natal

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## **Malaria cases drop in KwaZulu-Natal with the use of DDT**

The number of malaria cases recorded in KwaZulu-Natal has dropped from a high of 4 350 in January, 2000 to 1 700 in January this year. The fall is attributed by officials in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health partly to the use of the controversial pesticide DDT.

Provincial co-ordinator of the malaria control programme Joatham Mthembu says that the province became particularly concerned when high levels of malaria were recorded throughout the year. The usual trend is for a high transmission during the high rainfall season from November to the end of May. After this time recorded cases usually dwindle almost to zero. However, in June 2000, the number of cases recorded in KwaZulu-Natal was 4 553, higher than the figure for January of the same year (4 350).

Coupled with the increase in the number of reported cases of malaria, was the corresponding increase in the number of deaths from the disease. More than 27 000 people contracted malaria in 1999 and 214 people died of the disease. Last year there were almost 38 000 reported cases and 342 deaths. Reported cases in 1996 were far less at just 10 000.

Research conducted after the 1999 and 2000 increases found mosquitoes that transmitted malaria were still occupying dwellings, particularly those in the most affected areas in the northern parts of KwaZulu-Natal, that had been sprayed with user-friendly insecticides. Researchers found that the malaria-carrying mosquito was resistant to the biodegradable synthetic, pyrethroid, which has been used since South Africa switched from DDT in 1996.

DDT was originally used in KwaZulu-Natal for indoor malaria mosquito control from the 1940s, although the pesticide has been banned in numerous countries since the 1970s. However, it was sprayed again in South Africa in the middle of last year in an attempt to more effectively control the malaria-carrying mosquito. The method has been combined with a change in prescribed medication.

Officials say that DDT is regarded as an appropriate choice for malaria control, not only by South African administrators. Malaria Foundation International, which has campaigned for to prevent the complete ban of DDT, says that there are few effective or affordable alternatives to spraying homes with DDT in KwaZulu-Natal.

Protocols concerning the spraying and handling of DDT have been set up by national health department officials in conjunction with the KwaZulu-Natal Conservation Service, the Endangered Wildlife Trust, entomologists and the malaria control programme. The

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pesticide is being used solely for malaria control and officials say that fears of contracting malaria outweigh anxieties relating to DDT.

The reduction of malaria is an important aspect of the Lubombo Spatial Development Initiative (LSDI), a programme to develop an area linked by the Lubombo mountains and consisting of the north eastern part of KwaZulu-Natal and a portion of Swaziland and Mozambique. All three governments are involved in the programme which aims to develop the region into a globally competitive economic zone. Officials emphasise the need for co-ordinated efforts to deal with malaria which cannot be treated as if it were a country specific problem.

Research showing that malaria has a great negative impact on international tourists and some negative influence on South African visitors has spurred authorities to reduce malaria infections as part of the LSDI. A number of tourist facilities, particularly those based in Mozambique, have reported cancellations due to the fear of contracting malaria. "If we remove malaria from the area, tourism is bound to increase," Mthembu says.

The malaria project aims greatly to reduce infections within three years and is already being viewed as a potential model that can be used in other places where the disease is prevalent. It has already been used to develop programmes in two Zambian towns.

The impact of malaria in Africa, particularly in economic terms, is huge, according to the World Health Organisation, and almost 90% of the one million people who die from malaria annually are from sub-Saharan Africa. In a similar vein, the African Summit on Roll Back Malaria in Nigeria last year claimed that malaria had slowed the economic growth in African countries to the extent that some countries are experiencing negative growth rates.

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