Wake-up call for vector-borne diseases that are on the uptick

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Diseases from mosquito and tick bites occur in every U.S. state and territory. The growing incidence of Lyme disease and recent outbreaks of Zika virus and chikungunya point to the need for comprehensive vector-borne disease (VBD) programs. Physicians, health care teams and patients should be much more aware of VBDs, says an AMA Council on Science and Public Health report whose recommendations were adopted at the 2019 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

Sixteen VBDs “are reportable to state and territorial health departments and the National Notifiable Disease Surveillance System,” says the council report. “The most common VBDs in the United States are Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, West Nile virus, dengue and Zika virus disease. As a group, VBDs in the United States are notable for their wide distribution and resistance to control.”

Vector-control programs vary by jurisdiction, placing responsibilities on the local health department, mosquito control district or other local agencies. As a result, there are differing capabilities across the country.

“Our country currently has limited capacity to properly control mosquitoes, ticks and other sources of vector-borne disease that are causing more and more people to become ill. In fact, approximately 80 percent of vector-control organizations lack the resources they need to prevent and control vector-borne diseases,” said AMA Board Member E. Scott Ferguson, MD.

“In order to protect our citizens from illness, we must ensure that health departments and other vector-control organizations are equipped with funding and resources necessary to prevent and control vector-borne diseases,” Dr. Ferguson said. “It is also vitally important that we educate health professionals and the public about existing and emerging vector-borne diseases as it will be critical to addressing both prevention and treatment efforts.”

Given the rising threat from VBDS and the limited existing capacity to respond to that threat, the AMA House of Delegates amended existing policy to support and advocate:

- Improved surveillance for vector-borne disease to better understand the geographic
distribution of infectious vectors and where people are at risk.
The development and funding of comprehensive and coordinated vector-borne disease prevention and control programs at the federal, state and local level.
Investments that strengthen our nation’s public health infrastructure and the public health workforce.
Education and training for health care professionals and the public about the risk of vector-borne diseases and prevention efforts as well as the dissemination of available information.
Research to develop new vaccines, diagnostics, and treatments for existing and emerging vector-borne diseases, including Lyme disease.
Research to identify novel methods for controlling vectors and vector-borne diseases.
Increased and sustained funding to address the growing burden of vector-borne diseases in the United States.