



The Kerala alert

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There needs to be greater surveillance across India for the West Nile Virus

- The death of a child in Kerala's Malappuram district has drawn attention to the epidemiology of the little-known West Nile Virus in India.
- Though awareness is low, the virus is endemic to several States.
- The first documented WNV case in Kerala was in Alappuzha in 2011, with the numbers then growing.
- However, official records do not reflect this, given the difficulty of diagnosing WNV in its acute phase.
- More tests apart from ELISA are typically needed to confirm WNV, and while the results appear in journals, they don't always make it to State surveillance systems.
- Nevertheless, the alert is a welcome move which means that State health authorities will look harder for the disease.
- Historically, wherever Indian researchers have looked for the WNV, they have found it.
- Patient samples were sent to the Manipal Centre for Virus Research, which deployed the Plaque Reduction Neutralisation Test, more specific than ELISA.
- If more States used such diagnostics, it would help determine just how widespread WNV is in India.
- There is a good chance the virus is a significant cause of Acute Encephalitis Syndrome, the infamous basket of illnesses with no known aetiology that affect over 10,000 Indians each year.
- Viruses are known to adapt for both greater virulence and more efficient transmission.
- Urbanisation and land-use changes are bringing the virus's zoonotic hosts, such as birds, in more frequent contact with humans.
- Given increased mobility, viruses can hitch a ride to new regions via

infected humans and vectors.

- India's best defence is better surveillance, which will help doctors reach patients early to prevent complications.

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