

Plenary Lecture

Plenary Speaker – 02 **Methanol Poisoning: An Overview in** **SouthEast Asia and Asia Pacific** **“Breaking the Silence: What Can we Do?”**

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Background:

Every year thousands of people are poisoned by methanol, and in spite of effective treatment, an outbreak can typically kill up to 20-40% of the victims, and similar number can have permanent visual damage/blindness or brain damage. It typically affects the poorest of the poor - children and adults - predominantly in the low- and middle-income countries. It is made even more detrimental in that it often will tear away the young and healthy members of society, increasing the social burden.

Since methanol typically resembles a lot of other medical conditions and numerous reports often “coincidentally” reports on this as being a toxic alcohol (or even only illegal/bootleg alcohol), the number of reported outbreaks are likely to be only “the tip of the iceberg”.

Results and discussion:

The highest number of methanol poisoning incidents reported from 1998 to 2017 was identified from the Asian region. In Asia, Indonesia has the highest number of reported incidents, followed by India, Pakistan and Cambodia. Within the Southeast Asian region, incidents are also reported in Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines in the past two decades. Interestingly, no reported incidents were identified in Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, which could be due to underreporting. Based on other sources, an increasing number of incidents have also been reported in China, including the youngest case of a 2-year-old boy who died from methanol poisoning after his parents wiped industrial alcohol on his skin to cool down his fever. Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF/Doctors without Borders) in Indonesia has been working closely with the University of Oslo in Norway, in doing awareness campaign, technical capacity building and emergency preparedness. Various approaches have been used, such as approaching media, local support by capacity building of health professionals in the country, development of emergency preparedness plans, and developing and implementing locally adapted treatment protocols to increase awareness and knowledge on the topic. It has been an eye opener to the team that a majority have some experience with methanol poisoning individuals, but knowledge about the disease as such - being it the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment - until the topic is actually introduced to them.

Methanol Poisoning is a silent epidemic, a silent disaster and a brewing tsunami in Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific. It is time to break the silence on the epidemic proportions and find ways to work together to resolve this important medical topic.