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LETTER TO EDITOR **Open Access**

THE GROWING PREVALENCE OF MPOX AND THE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH: A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

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The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has had a profound impact on global health and society, severely affecting mental and physical health outcomes (Wallace et al., 2020; Omoregie and Carson, 2023). It also disrupted international politics, caused significant economic downturns, and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities (Marraha et al., 2023). These cascading effects have heightened global vigilance against emerging infectious diseases, including the Mpox virus, which poses a serious threat to public health and wellbeing.

Mpox, previously referred to as monkeypox, is a zoonotic viral infection caused by the monkeypox virus. It has become a growing concern due to its association with new outbreaks in several regions (Mittal et al., 2022; Abejegah, Obohwemu & Mdegela, 2024). To address the stigma associated with the term "monkeypox," the World Health Organization (WHO) introduced the term "Mpox" in 2022 (WHO, 2022). Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the WHO declared Mpox a public health emergency of international concern, emphasizing the need for robust global responses and preventive measures (Ahmed et al., 2022).

While Mpox is primarily a physical health concern, its psychological ramifications are equally significant. The outbreak has the potential to exacerbate existing mental health challenges and introduce new psychological stressors, such as heightened anxiety, depression, anger, recurrent sadness, and repetitive negative thinking. In addition, the disease can have indirect effects, such as financial losses and bereavement, which further compound mental health problems in affected individuals and communities.

The increasing prevalence of Mpox underscores its growing significance as a public health issue. In 2022, approximately 50,000 cases were reported globally across 100 countries. By January 2024, this number had doubled, with nearly 100,000 confirmed cases, according to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2024). However, the actual scale of the Mpox outbreak may remain underestimated due to limited testing, underreporting, and challenges in surveillance. Harris (2024) and Abejegah, Obohwemu & Mdegela (2024) highlighted these gaps, suggesting that the true burden of Mpox may be significantly higher than currently reported.

In the United Kingdom (UK), Mpox was considered rare before 2022, with only seven confirmed cases. However, data from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) revealed a substantial rise in cases, with 3,732 confirmed cases by the end of December 2023. Recent figures indicate an additional 286 cases reported by August 2024 (UKHSA, 2024). These statistics illustrate the persistent threat posed by Mpox and highlight the need for sustained efforts to monitor and control its spread.

Despite various containment strategies implemented globally, significant uncertainties remain regarding the trajectory of Mpox outbreaks. Healthcare systems, already overwhelmed by the resurgence of COVID-19, face added strain due to the Mpox outbreak (Rabiul Islam et al., 2022). The dual burden of managing these public health crises underscores the need for coordinated international action, enhanced surveillance, and increased investment in research and healthcare infrastructure.

One critical area of concern is the potential for Mpox to exacerbate mental health issues. There is substantial evidence linking COVID-19 to adverse mental health outcomes, including heightened anxiety, depression, and reduced wellbeing (Kauhanen et al., 2023; Omoregie and Carson, 2023; Kupcova et al., 2023). Similarly, emerging data suggest that Mpox can negatively affect mental health, particularly among those directly impacted by the disease.

Mpox has been associated with significant mental health challenges, including the onset or worsening of anxiety, depression, and other psychiatric disorders. These issues are often compounded by the social stigma, isolation, and emotional toll associated with the disease (Ogoina et al., 2020; Norberg et al., 2024; Le Forestier et al., 2024). In severe cases, the psychological burden of Mpox has led to suicidal tendencies (Chime et al., 2022). The stigma surrounding Mpox, rooted in misconceptions about its transmission and severity, further isolates affected individuals, impeding their access to care and support.

Public health programs must prioritize reducing stigma and misinformation to mitigate these psychological effects. Accurate and culturally sensitive communication about the nature of Mpox, its modes of transmission, and preventive measures can help reduce fear and discrimination (Daskalakis et al., 2022; Rabiul Islam et al., 2022). Targeted educational campaigns can foster greater awareness, encouraging individuals to seek timely medical attention and adhere to preventive guidelines without fear of judgment.

The mental health impact of Mpox is an area that remains poorly understood, necessitating further research to explore its complexities. Preliminary findings suggest that Mpox may contribute to the development of new mental health disorders or aggravate pre-existing conditions, including anxiety disorders, depression, and psychosis. These effects can be attributed to both the physical symptoms of the virus and the social isolation experienced by patients during recovery.

Additionally, the long-term mental health consequences of Mpox require closer examination. Similar to post-COVID-19 syndromes, individuals recovering from Mpox may experience residual psychological challenges that persist well beyond their physical recovery. Understanding these effects is crucial for developing effective interventions and support systems for affected individuals.

Research should also focus on identifying vulnerable populations, such as healthcare workers, who may face increased psychological stress due to their roles in managing Mpox cases. Studies exploring the experiences of frontline workers during the Mpox outbreak can provide valuable insights into the broader mental health implications of the disease and inform strategies for supporting these critical

personnel.

The Mpox outbreak underscores the interconnectedness of global health systems and the need for coordinated international responses to emerging infectious diseases. Governments and health organizations must work together to address both the physical and mental health dimensions of Mpox, recognizing that the two are inextricably linked.

Efforts to control the Mpox outbreak should include strengthening surveillance systems by enhancing disease monitoring and reporting mechanisms to provide a clearer picture of the outbreak's scale and inform targeted interventions. Investing in mental health support by expanding access to mental health services, particularly in areas heavily affected by Mpox, can help mitigate the psychological burden of the outbreak. Reducing stigma through public education by disseminating accurate information about Mpox can combat misinformation and promote understanding, reducing fear and discrimination. Promoting international collaboration by sharing resources, knowledge, and best practices among countries can enhance the effectiveness of global responses to Mpox.

The Mpox outbreak represents a significant public health challenge with far-reaching implications for physical and mental health. Addressing this crisis requires a multifaceted approach that includes robust surveillance, effective public education, and comprehensive mental health support. As the world continues to grapple with the dual burden of Mpox and COVID-19, it is imperative to recognize the interconnected nature of these challenges and invest in solutions that address both their immediate and long-term impacts. Prioritizing research, fostering collaboration, and promoting resilience will better prepare us for future public health emergencies and ensure the wellbeing of affected populations.

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