Tropical Disease Rampant in U.S. Cities
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So many of us think that as bad as things get here in the States, we're so much better off than those in the Third World. At least we're not afflicted with the same kind of maladies and health issues, right? Wrong.

A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) revealed some statistics that will give your notions about the living standards here in the U.S. a good shaking. These statistics show that close to a quarter of all black children who live in inner cities throughout the country are infected with roundworms. It also discovered that the leading cause of seizures among Hispanics living here is tapeworms.

That's right: Tropical parasitic diseases that are widespread in the most impoverished regions of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are just about as common right in our own backyard. Dr. Peter Hotez, the editor-in-chief of the Public Library of Science Journal Neglected Tropical Diseases claims that these potentially deadly parasitic infections are the most ignored maladies in the U.S. medical community.

"I feel strongly that this is such an important health issue, and yet because it only affects the poor it has been ignored," Hotez wrote in a recent e-mail.

Dr. Hotez goes on to point out that since 9/11, the U.S. has spent hundreds of millions of dollars to prevent theoretical bio-terrorist threats from viruses like anthrax, smallpox, and even bird flu, and yet has shown little to no concern for the "clear and present" threat of parasitic diseases that are already here in our cities.

And while I agree with Dr. Hotez that there are some appalling living conditions right here in the U.S., I think he's making a rather weak case by using increased incidences of roundworms and tapeworms as an example of how bad things are. Why? Because the majority of roundworm and tapeworm infections can be avoided with proper hygiene. It's possible to be poor because of circumstances beyond your control, but being filthy is entirely your own fault.

**Battling disease with a bar of soap**

The majority of roundworm infections are the result of dog-to-human or cat-to-human contact. The CDC has published figures that show up to 14 percent of the entire U.S. population has been infected with Toxocara roundworms, the kind found in household pets.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Hotez said that urban playgrounds are a rich source of Toxocara eggs because of the contaminated soil (inner city playgrounds are less apt to be cleaned than their suburban counterparts). One of the problems with parasites is that they thrive in unhygienic situations, which is why they're so rampant in the Third World. So any doctor will tell you that it's no great shock to hear that a dirty playground can make a kid sick.

Hotez draws parallels between the rampant number of Toxocariasis cases in the inner city and the rise in the number of asthma cases in the same areas. Definitely a bad thing. However, the pragmatist in me simply must point out that the best way to prevent Toxocara roundworm infection is proper hygiene. Although Dr. Hotez may be right that the poor are often overlooked, it may make slightly more sense to tell children to wash their hands more often rather than launch a government investigation into the problem.

The tapeworm is the more dangerous adversary, since it can cause an infection in the central nervous system. But you don't get tapeworms from being poor or living in the inner city – you get
them mostly from eating undercooked pork, or consuming food or water that's been contaminated with human feces. And this is a fact that leads me to believe that many of the "U.S. Hispanics" that Dr. Hotez sites as tapeworm-induced seizure victims are, in fact, illegal immigrants.

The U.S. has fairly rigorous meat inspection laws, and relatively good sanitation – even in the inner city. And there's next to nowhere in the U.S. where you'll find water that's been tainted by raw sewage. Not so in Mexico or Central America, where many of the "U.S. Hispanics" were born and raised. I'd be interested to know more about the "U.S. Hispanics" that Hotez references – it doesn't say whether these people were born in the States. My bottom dollar says that they weren't.

Dr. Hotez has a point: Living conditions in America's inner cities are crying out for improvement. But claiming that "tropical diseases of the Third World" are rife in our cities just isn't true. Especially when these diseases can be easily eradicated with warm water and a bar of soap.

With clean hands and a clear conscience,

William Campbell Douglass II, M.D.