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NPHIL Investigates Alleged Report of “Zika Virus Case” Liberia

Monrovia, Liberia – July 27, 2019: The National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) says its attention was seriously drawn to an article published in the Monday, July 22, 2019 edition of the Daily Observer Newspaper captioned “Zika Virus Identified in Liberia?” in which a Physical Therapist, Catherine Kurkett Kamara, of the SALT Rehabilitation Clinic made claims of diagnosing ZIKA Virus in a patient whom she has been managing since 2016 at the clinic. NPHIL immediately launched an investigation into allegation of Zika Virus identified in Liberia.

In its spontaneous scientific response, NPHIL consistent with its mandate, as the entity responsible for disease surveillance in Liberia, swiftly dispatched an ‘Investigative Team’ to SALT Rehabilitation Clinic in Zubah Town, Paynesville, outside Monrovia to ascertain and verify the relevant medical information in line with scientific diagnosis, since the emergence of such an infection in Liberia is a cause for concern.

The investigation established that SALT Rehabilitation Clinic is located in Zubah Town, Paynesville and is housed in a three-bedroom apartment. The Investigative Team comprised personnel from the Montserrado County Health Team, and the Divisions of Infectious Disease and Epidemiology of the National Public Health institute of Liberia and Global Health.

During the fact-finding visit at SALT Rehabilitation Clinic, the Investigative Team were met on arrival by a personnel of SALT Rehabilitation Clinic who introduced himself as an occupational and speech therapist and had been trained locally through (in-service method) at the facility. According to the Investigative Team, SALT Rehabilitation Clinic’s Lead Clinician, Mr. Theophilus T. Richards was neither available during the visit nor was Dr. Catherine Kurkett Kamara who is said to currently be in the U.S.A. However, the healthcare worker on-duty was interviewed, and he provided some information about the clinical care provided at the facility, which includes physio, occupational and speech therapies. The Investigative Team also requested and reviewed the ‘patients’ records’.

The two patients’ records that is being managed at the SALT Rehabilitation Clinic - admitted with a preliminary diagnosis of Developmental Delay was provided at the behest of the Investigative Team. The first patient, a 5-year old male, first seen on October 17, 2015 was diagnosed with generalized weakness in the arms, neck and legs. On the other hand, the second patient, 23-month-old male, was seen at the clinic on July 10, 2019 with similar presentations and a primary diagnosis of developmental
delay secondary to congenital anomalies and Zika Virus Disease. The investigation established that there was no information relating to the travel history of either the patients or parents, which was further compounded by no laboratory test results available in the patient records that supported the diagnosis of Zika Virus.

According to the SALT Rehabilitation Clinic staff interviewed, both patients are alive and currently undergoing therapeutic management at the clinic on an out-patient basis. The investigation revealed that there were no patients admitted at the clinic at the time of the visit.

In an effort to verify the validity of SALT Rehabilitation Clinic, the Liberia Medical and Dental Council (LMDC) confirmed that the clinic is duly registered with the LMDC and has a License covering ‘physician’. However, the LMDC maintained that Dr. Catherine Kurkett Kamara is a Physical Therapist not licensed by the entity.

Meanwhile, according to the Director General of National Public Health Institute of Liberia (NPHIL) Hon. Tolbert Nyenswah, there are Standing Operating Procedures (SOPs) in detecting and announcing diseases of public health significance in Liberia like Zika. DG Nyenswah said the assertion by Dr. Kamara uncharacteristically met ‘zero’ of any of the set standards and noted it was unfortunate to have made such declaration. Regrettably, Dr. Kamara is neither licensed by Liberia Medical and Dental Council (LMDC) as a practicing physician nor an epidemiologist.

He maintained that NPHIL encourages institutions commenting on issues bordering on infectious diseases must fact-check scientific data before making public statements on disease outbreak, adding: “It is only the Minister of Health consistent with the Laws of Liberia that can declare an outbreak. He said NPHIL National Reference Laboratory in collaboration with partners will work with the relevant institutions for advanced testing of unknown pathogens.

DG Nyenswah concluded by saying: “The news story about Zika Virus identified in Liberia as reported in the Daily Observer is far from the truth”.

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