



## THE NIGERIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCE

**Academy House:** 8A Ransome-Kuti Road, University of Lagos Campus, Akoka, Yaba  
**Postal Address:** P.M.B. 1004 University of Lagos Post Office, Akoka, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria  
Tel. +2348089622442  
**E-mail:** president@nas.org.ng **Website:** www.nas.org.ng

### **Lassa Fever (LF) Outbreaks in Nigeria: Time for Positive and Sustained Action.**

Nigeria should declare Lassa Fever disease a public health event of national emergency and concern.

- Since Lassa Fever was first reported in Nigeria, in January 1969, a total of 16,783 suspected cases have been reported with 1,047 deaths. Of the fatal cases, 73 healthcare workers (doctors, nurses and other categories of hospital staff) have died.
- The disease occurs throughout the year, with seasonal peaks, beginning from the early dry season months of November until the beginning of the rainy season.
- Between 1969 and 2007, LF was reported in only 2 states (Borno and Plateau). However, from 2008 to 2012, the disease spread to an additional 8 other states; from 2013 until 2019, at least 23 states report Lassa Fever cases annually.
- Over the 50-year period of Nigeria reporting 16,783 suspected Lassa Fever cases, 11,195 (67%) were reported between 2016 and January 29, 2020, while 632 (60%) of 1,047 Lassa fever deaths were reported during the same period.
- In 2016, 921 suspected cases were reported. The respective figures for 2017 and 2018 were 1,030 and 3498 suspected cases. An alarm was raised over the tripling of the number of suspected cases between 2017 and 2018, only for the reported number of suspected cases to rise in 2019 to 5057 which was 145% of the reported 2018 figures.
- During the period 1969 to 1975, the range of Lassa Fever mortality in hospitalized patients, was 33%-100%. In recent years, the mortality rate has dropped to 20%
- Laboratory confirmation of suspected cases has been of great concern. Of the 3498 suspected cases in 2018, only 633 (18%) were confirmed LF positive, while in 2019, only 833 (16.5%) of the 5057 suspected were confirmed.

### **Observation**

- Over the past 50 years, Lassa Fever has become a disease occurring in perennial outbreaks, in nearly all the States of Nigeria, with increasing numbers of suspected cases, dry season peaks, and unacceptably high case fatality rates. While a drug exists for the treatment of the disease, the inefficient laboratory diagnosis and late hospital admission of patients, add up to make the drug less effective in treating Lassa Fever patients. The spread of the disease throughout the country may have resulted from increasing human -rodent contact in an explosive population of rodents generated by pervasive poor environmental sanitation

Nigeria must take positive and sustained action necessary to prevent and control Lassa Fever NOW, and not wait until more fatalities are recorded as a result of the yearly occurrence.

### **Recommendations**

While acknowledging and commending the effort of the federal government, the Federal Ministry of Health, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), and other relevant agencies so far, the Academy hereby calls for more action and recommends that:

- ✓ The Federal Government should declare Lassa Fever disease a public health event of national concern attaining an emergency status.
- ✓ An interdisciplinary One-Health Committee (comprising of medical and veterinary specialists, epidemiologists, social scientists, media practitioners, community representatives etc.) should be set up to advise and assist the NCDC in investigating and managing Lassa Fever outbreaks.
- ✓ Government should provide adequate funds for a sensitive disease surveillance system backed by a reliable network of diagnostic laboratories.
- ✓ Given that only about 20% of suspected Lassa Fever cases are usually confirmed, there is the need to improve the capability and enhance the capacity of the national laboratory network for reliable and efficient DEFINITIVE diagnosis of suspected cases.
- ✓ The Federal and State Governments need to mount an extensive and sustained public Lassa Fever prevention and control awareness programme.
- ✓ Each State should establish a functional isolation ward for the treatment of Lassa Fever patients.
- ✓ It is important to set up a mechanism for improving environmental sanitation in a sustained manner throughout the country to reduce rodent population and rodent – human contact.
- ✓ Funds should be provided for research into finding new drugs for Lassa Fever treatment and the development of a Lassa Fever vaccine.

Signed by:

**Professor K. Mosto Onuoha, FAS**

*President, Nigerian Academy of Science*