

Cholera.

The disease has killed 7,000 in Haiti, but community outreach is the cure.

When cholera first appeared in Haiti in late 2010, people on the roadsides in remote mountain villages would cover their noses and mouths with t-shirts as a St. Boniface ambulance trundled past, on its way to deliver some sick or injured person to the St. Boniface Hospital in Fond-des-Blancs. They did so because they were afraid they might catch cholera from whoever was inside.

Their reaction was a testament to how poorly understood cholera was when the first case was diagnosed in Haiti in October 2010, a century after the last outbreak of the disease.

So before cholera spread to Haiti's southern region, SBHF devised an aggressive plan to educate the people in our catchment area on the prevention and treatment of this water-borne disease.

So our teams of community health workers -- more than 50 trained local volunteers led by a staff of nurses -- fanned out across our region in an effort to reach the approximately 120,000 people living in our catchment area. They brought laptops and played videos, they supplied chlorine and soap and demonstrated how to purify water and properly wash hands. SBHF set up 40 oral rehydration points in different communities to provide rehydrating salts and educational materials on cholera prevention.

Many did not realize that cholera can't be caught from breathing air -- it's contracted when the victim ingests food or water contaminated by the fecal matter of an infected individual.

The bacteria then infects the small intestine and causes severe diarrhea, vomiting and fever which can rapidly lead to dehydration and death. And in a country with no sanitation system, a disease like cholera can turn epidemic in a flash. To deal with the onslaught of cases, the SBHF team set up a cholera treatment center on the hospital campus -- downstream and a safe distance away to avoid contaminating the general water supply. A half dozen tents were erected and outfitted with cholera cots. Staff installed water pumps, disinfecting stations and a separate kitchen to guard against cross-contamination.

The spring rains brought a spike in cases -- nearly 200 in May 2011 alone. At the close of 2011, 853 people had been treated for cholera at St. Boniface Hospital.

Nationally, more than 500,000 have been infected, more than 7,000 have died. The epidemic, although it has slowed, is not over. Cholera bacteria can survive in the ground water for many years, waiting to return with every rainy season in Haiti.

"Cholera will probably be endemic in Haiti due to low education levels, precarious socioeconomic conditions, poor sanitation and limited access to clean water," says Dr. Inobert Pierre, director general of the hospital. "But what has been very encouraging to us is the low prevalence of cholera in the areas where we intervened the most."

A mother holds her 11-month-old son, being treated for cholera in a quarantined tent at St. Boniface Hospital in January 2011.

