

## Public health, tourism and being proactive

It is now widely accepted that tourism underwrites most Caribbean economies; that Governments and electorates depend on it to provide employment; that the industry provides substantial income through taxation that supports social and infrastructural spending; and that in its periphery, it creates demand for goods and services for everyone from farmers to junior physicians, lawyers and accountants.

As a consequence few now question the strategic economic importance of the industry to most Caribbean economies and governments, tourist boards and hoteliers across the region work hard to ensure that all visitors have a peaceful, happy and enjoyable experience.

Addressing the issue of public health and tourism is therefore sensitive and tends not to be often discussed in a public way. This is because there is always the danger that by drawing attention, any concern may dissuade visitors from booking what will be a perfectly safe and happy vacation.

However, this is changing as governments and the tourism sector recognise that it is better to act in a timely manner and to provide accurate information.

As the chikungunya virus has spread across the Caribbean, tourism ministries and public health agencies have had to begin to say more about the steps that they are taking to monitor any possible impact on visitors or those who work in the industry, and to help step up the precautions that hotels and attractions need to take.

Speaking recently about the mosquito borne virus, Jamaica's Minister of Tourism, Wykeham McNeill, said that the industry has been spared the effects, but government was working closely with stakeholders in the hospitality sector and public health agencies to take necessary proactive measures.

One consequence of this and similar approaches by Governments across the region is that the virus has had no negative impact on tourism arrivals. Moreover, although cases have been reported in most islands, because the incidence is statistically low, government travel advisories from North America and Europe simply consist of warnings to take steps to avoid being bitten by mosquitoes.

Earlier this year in a speech to the Caribbean Tourism Organisation (CTO), Dr James Hospedales, the Executive Director of The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), made clear the importance of all involved in the industry taking a well thought through approach. He noted that in order to avoid any undue adverse impact on the Caribbean economy or the tourism industry, lessons learnt from others should be heeded.

Observing that in La Reunion in the Indian Ocean, a chikungunya outbreak in 2006-2007 reduced tourism arrivals by 37 per cent – a decline that no tourism destination in the Caribbean could withstand – the key lesson, he said, was that “early, prompt, accurate, regular communication with the population and the media are essential, and for tourism and hotel industry to work with Ministry of Health and all stakeholders”. It is an issue, he noted, that CARPHA is working closely on with its partners to minimise any adverse economic impact and spread of the disease.

More generally, in this context, it is particularly welcome that CTO and CARPHA established early this year a joint regional tourism and health programme that aims to lessen the industry's vulnerability to health and safety issues that might challenge the sustainability of Caribbean tourism.

What recent comments on the chikungunya outbreak have demonstrated, is that Government and the industry have largely understood that careful monitoring, the exchange of information, well judged public comment, and close cooperation between ministries of public health and regional and international health authorities, is the best way to ensure that the region's tourism economy is not damaged and visitors remain safe.