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COVID-19 in the Caribbean

It had looked as if Barbados might avoid a destructive COVID-19 pandemic. The Caribbean nation, home to around 287 000 people, registered fewer than 400 cases of the disease for the whole of 2020. But January, 2021, saw a surge. By the end of the month, Barbados had registered well over 1000 new cases of COVID-19. On Feb 3, 2021, it went into lockdown. On the same day, Saint Lucia declared a state of emergency. It has confirmed more than three times as many cases of COVID-19 this year as it did last year. Like Barbados, Saint Lucia has imposed a nightly curfew on its 180 000 or so residents. Community transmission of COVID-19 has also been established in other parts of the Caribbean, including Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

"We are seeing more clusters of transmission and some places are no longer able to trace all the new cases that are emerging", notes Joy St John, executive director of the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA). CARPHA has helped co-ordinate the response to COVID-19 across the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a regional body that brings together 20 countries and overseas territories, most of which are island states. The membership are mostly English-speaking (Haiti and Suriname are notable exceptions). The Spanish speaking parts of the Caribbean are culturally and politically distinct. Neither Cuba, which has experienced a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases this year, nor the Dominican Republic, which has consistently struggled to contain the disease, are members of CARICOM.

COVID-19 was not detected in the region until March, 2020. "The CARICOM Caribbean perhaps benefited somewhat from the lag between the outbreak taking off in Europe and the first cases arriving in the Caribbean", explains Ian Hambleton (Professor of Biostatistics at The George Alleyne Chronic Disease Research Centre, The

University of the West Indies, Barbados, West Indies). "It allowed a certain amount of pre-planning." According to an analysis co-authored by Hambleton, Caribbean nations began controlling movement into the country an average of 27 days before their first confirmed case of COVID-19. From April-June, 2020, the CARICOM countries largely closed their borders. The majority imposed strict restrictions on internal movement. Those who broke curfew in Barbados were liable for hefty fines. The country saw sharp reductions in population mobility.

By June, 2020, as new infections continued to rise in Central and South America, the Caribbean had flattened the curve. But the control measures came at a cost. The nations of the Caribbean are heavily reliant on tourism. In 2019, visitors and holidaymakers brought US \$59 billion to the region. Saint Lucia lost at least \$220 million in revenues last year. From June, 2020, the Caribbean began to re-open. Most countries demanded that visitors present a negative PCR test and complete a period of quarantine. Jamaica set up a so-called resilient corridor, outside of which tourists were not permitted.

St John does not think the return of tourism is the main driver behind the recent spike in cases. She points out that several countries managed to re-open their borders for several months, with few cases and no deaths. Still, it might well have been a tourist who brought the highly transmissible B.1.1.7. variant of SAR-CoV-2 to the Caribbean late last year.

"There has also been a certain amount of COVID fatigue among the people here, so they have let down their guard a bit", adds St John. Gatherings at Christmas probably contributed to a subsequent rise in cases, and there might have too strong a focus on testing visitors, to the exclusion of the local population. There are also country-specific factors. Transmission in Belize

was kick-started by people turning out to vote in the elections last November.

The UK is responsible for vaccinating populations on its overseas territories. It has despatched 8000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to the British Virgin Islands; the vaccination drive in the Cayman Islands is well underway. Other parts of the region are expected to start vaccinating their citizens by mid-March. Some nations are relying on COVAX, a joint initiative between WHO, and Gavi, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, which aims to ensure equitable worldwide distribution of the vaccines. Others have struck bilateral deals with the manufacturers.

Hambleton suggests that local familiarity with hurricane preparedness primed the people of the Caribbean for lockdown and stay-at-home measures. The region has not seen the politicisation of mask-wearing or sizeable anti-lockdown protests. Chief Medical Officers have formed WhatsApp groups to share information and direct supplies, and heads of government have worked together to oversee the pandemic response. "Our politicians have kept themselves informed of what has been happening abroad and taken a pragmatic approach", said St John. People have been co-operative. Businesses in Barbados took it upon themselves to close their doors if they discovered an employee had tested positive for SARS-CoV-2. "There has been a real sense of 'pulling together'", Hambleton told *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*.

Talha Khan Burki



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