How do you prevent viral outbreaks? By protecting animal health

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Many dangerous diseases such as COVID-19, Ebola and Q fever have jumped from animals to humans. But it is not only because of these diseases that we should include animals in our health policy, but also

because of their right to health, writes Ph.D. candidate Joachim Nieuwland. Ph.D. defense on 13 May.

At the markets in the Chinese city of Wuhan you could, until recently, find a wide array of different animals, ranging from giant salamanders to porcupines and from frogs to badgers. One by one these animals disappeared into the pots and pans of the hungry city population. And at some point, coronavirus must have jumped to humans, probably via a horseshoe bat with a pangolin as 'intermediary."

Heightened contact with wild animals

This is typical of the times we live in, says Ph.D. candidate Joachim Nieuwland. All around the world humans are in more frequent and intensive contact with wild animals. Because of logging, poaching and the fragmentation of natural habitats, humans and animals are encroaching on each other's territory. And that means a threat to our health. It is estimated that over 60% of the known viruses that infect humans originally come from animals.

Humans not separate

If we want to reduce the risk of these types of disease (in medical jargon: zoonoses) in future, we will have to change our thinking about what a moral right to health entails, says Nieuwland in his dissertation on ethics. "The recent virus outbreaks show that a one-sided focus on human healthcare does not suffice," Nieuwland says. "We like to think that we humans are separate from other species of animal. But in practice, we greatly depend on each other for our health."

Multistranded health policy

We therefore have to move to a multistranded health policy in which we do not place humans on a pedestal but see ourselves instead as part of a society of different species, Nieuwland argues. From this perspective, the trade and consumption of wild animals and the infringement of their habitat is already exceptionally risky with regard to the transmission of diseases such as COVID-19 and Ebola. In other words: the right to health should be more ecologically embedded and geared towards our interactions with other animals. Nieuwland prefers to talk about human and non-human animals to indicate that we are closer to one another than we would sometimes like to admit.

Will this 'upgrade' to the right to health help banish viral diseases such as corona? Not exactly, Nieuwland does not want to create unrealistic expectations. "But it will mean that we are better adjusted to them. So listen to those epidemiologists who have been drawing a link between public health and interaction between humans and animals for some time already. Then we can at least reduce the risk of viruses jumping species, as happened at the market in Wuhan."

Gorillas and chimpanzees

For his research, Nieuwland looked at gorillas, chimpanzees and other apes. Not only are these species beautiful and threatened, but they are also as vulnerable to infectious diseases as we are. Ebola can pose a threat to humans if, for instance, they eat contaminated ape meat, but it also poses a threat to the ape populations themselves. What is more, human respiratory tract infections, and possibly even COVID-19, can cause serious diseases in these animals.

It is this vulnerability that highlights the health interests of apes themselves, and this forms a possible basis for an animal right to health, says Nieuwland. "Health mainly comprises the absence of suffering and the possibilities that this offers to live a meaningful life," he says.

"Neither interest is reserved to humans alone but applies as well to apes and other animals. This right means that we humans have a certain duty to protect the health of apes: for instance, by protecting their habitat from human interference or even by considering vaccinations against Ebola."

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