

The Northern Echo

The North's campaigning newspaper

Founded 1870 Issue No 45,215

COMMENT**The danger of secrecy**

POLITICIANS' expenses will always be a thorny subject – especially at a time when the public sector is being squeezed so tightly.

It is, therefore, no surprise that the claims for entertainment, submitted by flamboyant Commons Speaker John Bercow, have caused a fresh kerfuffle.

When libraries and children's centres are closing, and historic buildings such as Darlington's Victorian covered market are under threat, it is entirely understandable that questions will be asked about whether the Speaker needs to be spending more than £1,000 on bees-wax candles, and £286 to tune a grand piano, on top of £2,000 on a dinner to mark the retirement of former Deputy Speaker and Labour MP Dawn Primarolo.

But while scrutiny is vital, the controversy also needs to be kept in perspective. The Speaker is a traditional, ceremonial role and with it comes an expectation that he or she will be required to host functions for fellow parliamentarians. Grand pianos also need tuning from time to time.

What is important is that the spending attached to public roles is completely transparent because that will always promote accountability.

The Speaker's latest expenses claims are more of a news story simply because they were divulged by the Press Association under Freedom of Information rules.

When journalists obtain information that would otherwise be private, it is natural for them to justify the time and effort by making it news with a harder edge than might otherwise have been warranted.

The lesson for the Speaker's office is to have every item of expenditure itemised on a public website as a matter of course.

Hide information away and it becomes more interesting. Keep it out in the open and it is less likely to be blown out of proportion.

What do you think?
echo@nne.co.uk

Write to: The Editor, Peter Barron, Hear All Sides, The Northern Echo, PO Box 14, Priestgate, Darlington, DL1 1NF.

Fax: 01325-360754

email: echo@nne.co.uk

The Northern Echo
Daily average audience

Print **79,670**

Source: JICREG & ABC Jul-Dec 2013

Online **33,990**

Source: ABCE Jul-Dec 2013

TOTAL 113,660

QUALITY

If you have any comments or suggestions about the print quality of today's copy of **The Northern Echo**, please contact our customer care department on 01325-505151.



FEARS: A health worker sprays insecticide to combat the *Aedes aegypti* mosquitoes that transmit the Zika virus in Rio de Janeiro

Fighting Zika

YOU can be forgiven if you hadn't heard of the Zika virus until recently. I have to admit that I was unaware of it until the news broke in late 2015 that there had been an outbreak in Brazil, affecting more than a million people.

The virus, transmitted by the mosquito *Aedes aegypti*, is not new. It was first discovered in monkeys living in the Zika Forrest Uganda, in 1947, and was identified in the blood of humans in the 1950s. Yet for decades it caused barely a ripple of concern, with only 14 documented cases prior to 2007.

The first proper outbreak outside Africa was identified that year in Yap Island, Micronesia, and since then it has spread eastward, affecting Brazil, much of South and Central America and the Caribbean, with mosquitos carrying the virus from person-to-person in a manner similar to malaria.

It is thought that the first case in Brazil may have been transmitted from an individual travelling to the World Cup. The arrival of Zika has caused panic. The Brazilian government has deployed more than 300,000 health workers and 220,000 soldiers.

Such is the level of concern that the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Zika a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on February 1.

Although the mosquito which transmits the virus is unable to survive the UK climate, so far six cases have been diagnosed in UK travellers.

Many infected individuals may not be aware of this, with the majority developing no physical illness whatsoever. In about 20 per cent, symptoms are typically mild and short lived, mimicking the flu, with fever, headache, red eyes, muscle and joint pains. Serious complications are thankfully rare, with most making a full recovery within two weeks.

However it has been suggested that there is a link between the illness and developing Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a condition affecting the nervous system, which at its worse can paralyse the muscles responsible for breathing. The real concern is for pregnant women who become infected with the virus. Zika has been indicated in the devel-



THE World Health organisation has declared the Zika virus a global public health emergency. How scared should we be? **Dr Zak Uddin** reports

opment of microcephaly, a tragic situation where the baby is born with a shrunken head and severe, lifelong mental retardation.

Brazil alone has seen a 20-fold increase in this awful disease since 2015, with over 4,000 new cases compared to a yearly average of less than 200. Currently there is no vaccine against the Zika virus.

With this in mind, individuals in the UK are likely to remain safe, firstly because the virus only lasts a maximum of four weeks in the human body and secondly because the UK climate is too cool for the *Aedes* mosquito to survive or breed.

However, in an era of global travel, Public Health England has issued simple and clear guidelines to hopefully minimise any chance of becoming infected. It advises that all travellers to areas where Zika virus is active should practice rigorous mosquito bite avoidance, both day and night.

The mosquito typically attacks during the mid-morning to dusk, as opposed to those transmitting malaria, which attack at night. Guidelines advocate using an insect repellent containing 50 per cent DEET, which typically lasts 12 hours.

If sunscreen is required, this should be applied before the insect repellent. Pregnant women are advised not to travel to affected areas, unless absolutely necessary. If this is

unavoidable, the above measures should be used. If you are pregnant, be sure to alert your doctor or midwife on return to the UK, whether you have had symptoms or not. Female travellers returning from an affected country should avoid attempting to conceive for 28 days, so that any possible virus will no longer remain in the blood stream.

Although there is no direct proof that Zika is sexually transmitted, it has been identified in the semen of affected men.

On returning to the UK, advice is that male partners of women currently pregnant or planning pregnancy, should use condoms for 28 days if there have been no symptoms of the virus or for six months if they have had symptoms, or Zika has been identified in a blood sample.

While this sounds very scary, careful consideration of whether travel to affected areas is really necessary, the short time that the virus is able to survive in the human body and the fact that the *Aedes* mosquito cannot survive in our colder climate, means that hopefully the UK will not be affected by the Zika virus.

■ **Useful Websites:** travelhealthpro.org.uk, gov.uk/guidance/Zika-virus (for a full list of affected countries) and nhs.uk advice for patients and members of the general public from NHS Choices

“Although the mosquito which transmits the virus is unable to survive the UK climate, so far six cases have been diagnosed in UK travellers.”

Dr Zak Uddin