

Snakebite – Long Ignored, Recently Recognized as Neglected Disease

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Professor Mohammad Abul Faiz (Bangladesh) accepting the Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize for Public Health in May 2026.

Snake bites are neglected even amongst [neglected tropical diseases](#) (NTDs), said Bangladesh's Professor Mohammad Abul Faiz, who was awarded the prestigious Dr Lee Jong-wook Memorial Prize at an event on the sidelines of last week's World Health Assembly (WHA).

The prize is for individuals, institutions, and governmental or nongovernmental organisations whose contributions to public health have gone beyond the call of duty.

Faiz, who was honoured for his work on NTDs, including snakebites, is an authority on infectious and tropical diseases, including malaria and snakebite envenomings – a process in which the snakebite introduces venom into a person's body.

A medical doctor, he has worked in the public health sector in Bangladesh for 32 years, including as that country's Director General of Health Services and as Dean of Medicine at the University of Dhaka.

He led Bangladesh's first nationwide study on snakebite envenoming, the first in Asia, and is the author of both the Bangladesh Snakebite Guideline and the WHO Global Snakebite Guideline.

He also co-chaired the [WHO Snakebite Envenoming Working Group](#), was a member of the WHO group on malaria treatment guidelines, and has collaborated with major international initiatives on neglected diseases and malaria control.

While semi-retired, Faiz is still active in public life as the president of the [Toxicology Society of Bangladesh](#) and the founder of the Dev Care Foundation, a non-profit that works on health promotion and disease prevention with marginalised communities.

In his acceptance speech, Faiz pointed out that snake bites are the only non-communicable disease listed in the [WHO's list of 21 neglected tropical diseases](#),

“So it does not fit either in the communicable diseases, where they deal with NTDs, nor the non-communicable diseases, which are overburdened with classical non-communicable diseases: hypertension, diabetes, stroke, coronary artery disease etcetera,” Faiz said.

He said that community engagement had been essential in his work on snake bites and malaria, particularly to counter bureaucracy.

“The trickling [of information] from the centre, down to the community is a long process... so also is the funding process. So engaging the community upfront is essential,” he said.



Millions are bitten by snakes every year, and struggle to access care.

Shining a spotlight on snakebites

An estimated 5.4 million people worldwide are bitten by snakes each year and around 1.8 to 2.7 million cases of envenomings, [according](#) to the WHO.

Most snake bites happen in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They can be fatal, cause paralysis and lead to amputations. While treatments do exist, only a handful of countries produce the antivenoms. [Cost and access](#) are both barriers to effective treatment.

Faiz's career of over two decades was also spent working on diseases like malaria that affect vulnerable populations in low-resource settings.

“His work on snake bite envenoming reminds us of a reality that is too often invisible: the burden of neglected tropical diseases that affect millions of people, particularly in the most vulnerable regions of our planet,” said Robert Mardini, Director of Geneva University Hospitals, at the award ceremony.

Snake bite envenoming was recognised in 2017 by the WHO as a high-priority neglected tropical disease, said Mardini.

“This recognition did not happen by chance. It is the result of years of research, advocacy, and field engagement.

“Fundamental progress in global health happens only when science, field experience and institutions work in collaboration work hand in hand,” Mardini added.

The existing antivenoms, “may not properly reflect the geographical variation that occurs in the venoms of some widespread species,” [according](#) to the WHO.



Sania Nishtar, CEO of the global vaccine alliance Gavi.

Climate change is worsening inequities in health

The prize-giving ceremony, co-hosted by the WHO and the [Geneva Health Forum](#), also served as a gathering of global health leaders to discuss ideas.

“There’s an inextricable relationship between animal health, human health, and environmental health. In our line of work, we see it playing out very, very often now. So diseases are appearing in areas where they were not recognisable at one point in time,” said Sania Nishtar, CEO of the global vaccine alliance, Gavi.

She added that while there are funding challenges, many countries have also stepped up their domestic health funding, particularly in Africa, which is a positive sign.

The prize is awarded in honour of Dr Lee Jong-wook, the sixth Director-General at the World Health Organization (WHO), and [died](#) at the age of 61 in 2006.

“He believed in equity, he believed in solidarity, and the fundamental right to health for all,” said Saia Ma’u Piukala, regional director of the WHO Western Pacific Region.

“His work [in] expanding access to essential medicines, strengthening preparedness, advancing universal health coverage and investing in health workers and communities continues to shape WHO priorities today,” he added.

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