

Africa Infodemic Response Alliance

A WHO-HOSTED NETWORK



AIRA Infodemic Trends Report

19-26 September 2023

(Weekly brief #90)

Top concerns

[Social listening in Nigeria reveals a need to better inform communities about the disease](#)

Social listening in Nigeria reveals that misinformation and information gaps continue to influence perceptions about the disease.

[Skepticism about HPV vaccine safety in Zambia](#)

In response to posts from the Ministry of Health in Zambia about the HPV vaccine, anti-vaccine sentiments and apprehensions about potential side effects of the HPV vaccination emerged

[Measles outbreaks continue to affect populations displaced by the Sudan crisis.](#)

While regional media outlets initially show interest in the consequences of the Sudan crisis, the media coverage has noticeably declined the past few days.

Reference Guide

<u>Social listening in Nigeria reveals a need to better inform communities about the disease</u>	Pg. 3
<u>Skepticism about HPV vaccine safety in Zambia</u>	Pg. 5
<u>Measles outbreaks continue to affect populations displaced by the Sudan crisis</u>	Pg. 6

Trends to watch

<u>Resurgence of conversations about cholera in Malawi</u>	Pg. 8
<u>Mauritians worried over bat-born Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala, India</u>	Pg. 8

<u>Key resources</u>	Pg. 9
<u>Methodology</u>	Pg. 10

Public Health Infodemic Trends in the African Region

This weekly report provides key highlights and operational recommendations based on social listening data from September 19-26 in Africa.

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Nigeria

Social listening in Nigeria reveals a need to better inform communities about the disease

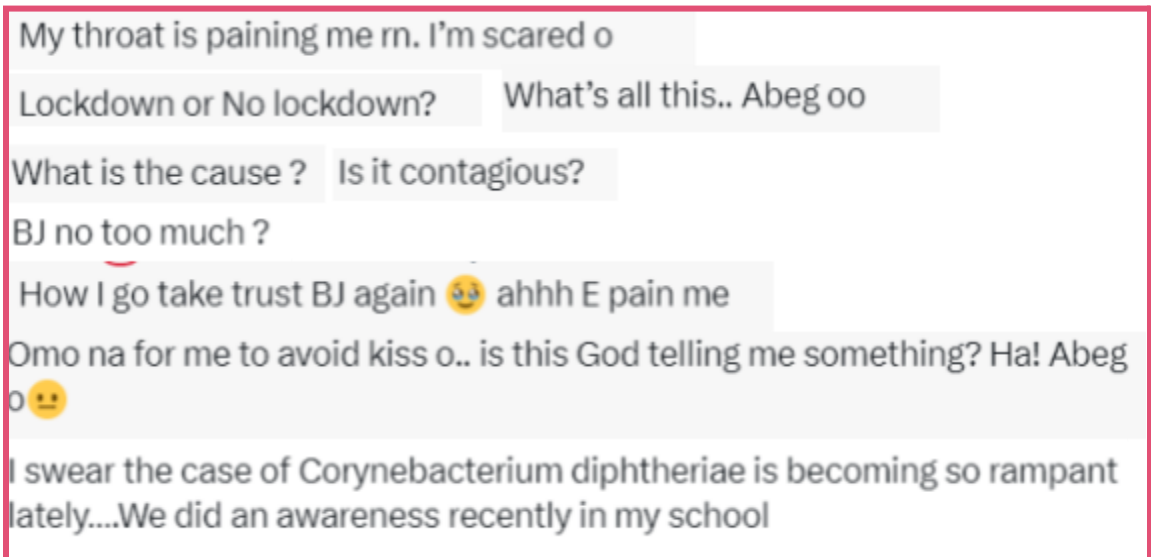
Engagement: **24 posts, 2.2k likes, 261 comments, 462k views**

Community feedback discussions:

- According to a [social listening report from WHO Infodemic team in Nigeria](#) for September, 26% of individuals residing in hotspot locations are not familiar with diphtheria as a recognized disease, 13% perceive diphtheria as a normal part of children's natural development, and 17% believe diphtheria is untreatable.
- As per the report, Jema'a, a local government area (LGA) located in southern Kaduna State, is experiencing the highest proliferation of misinformation.

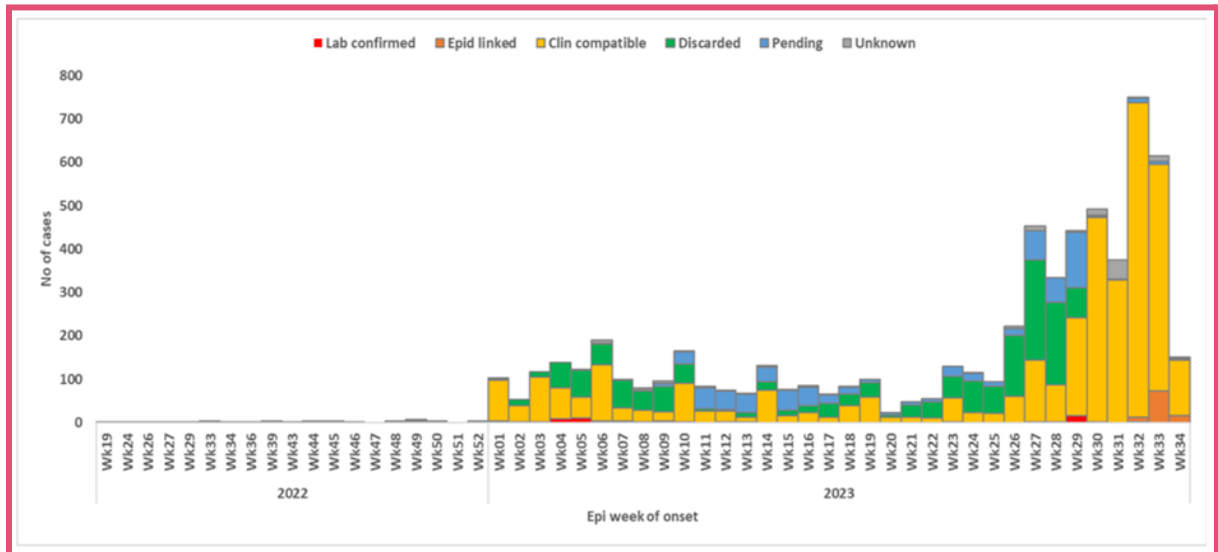
Social media commentary:

- According to online social listening findings, X (formerly Twitter) captured the online audience's attention on diphtheria to a greater extent than Facebook and TikTok.
- A post about diphtheria from [Naija](#), a Nigerian online news agency boasting 4.4 million Twitter followers, and garnered more than 419.9k views.
- Online users who engaged with the post posed inquiries about the disease's origins and voiced their concerns upon viewing an image of a throat affected by diphtheria. Additionally, some individuals speculated that excessive sexual activity might be a potential cause. Below are some comments:



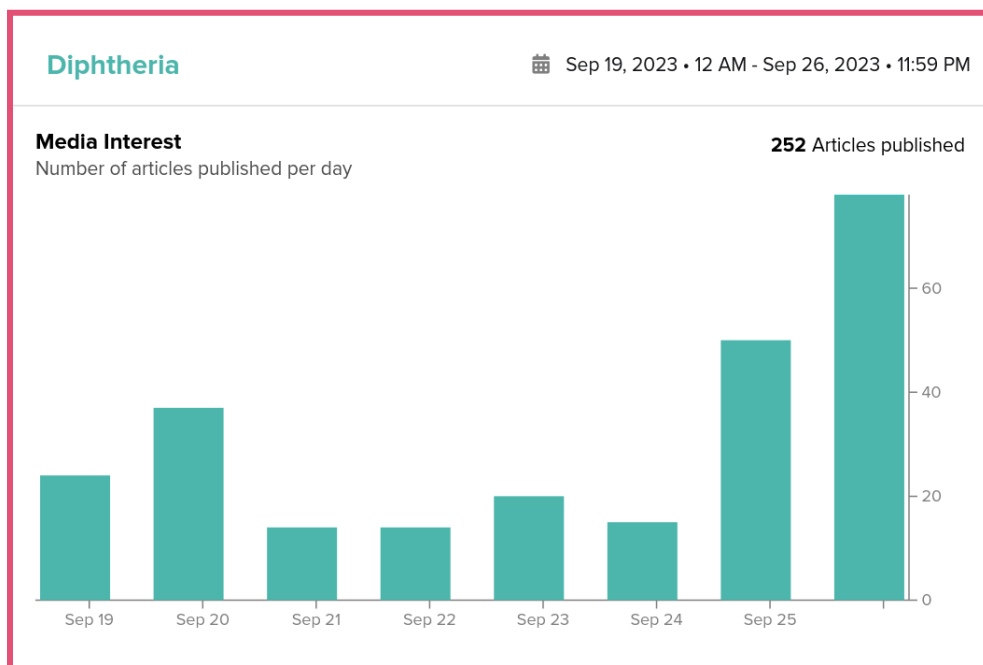
Why is it concerning?

- The [latest risk assessment by the World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) regarding the diphtheria outbreak in Nigeria has upheld the risk as high at the national level with 99.4% of suspected cases reported from Kano state, a densely populated state with a population of 15 million people.



Source: WHO risk assessment diphtheria cases by year/epi-week in Nigeria, 1 May 2022 – 27 August 2023

- An increase in the volume of media articles underscores the increasing concern regarding the severity and extent of diphtheria in Nigeria. [During an emergency, health departments may receive a surge in media inquiries seeking accurate information about the outbreak.](#)



Source: Number of articles published per day in Nigeria in English - NewsWhip

- A combination of factors might have caused the recent spike in cases of diphtheria in Nigeria especially in the northern states. The lack of vaccine doses, a need to reinforce the health system, on top of vaccine hesitancy and misinformation around vaccines might have been contributing factors that draw setbacks for immunization. In previous AIRA reports we have highlighted [claims that diphtheria is related to COVID-19 in Nigeria](#), [conspiracy theories in relation to diphtheria following Bill Gates' visit to Nigeria](#).

What can we do?

- Drafting RCCE messages that directly address the concerns outlined in the report and other sources) and complement the groundwork carried out on the frontlines by healthcare professionals can mitigate the disease's spread in hotspot regions.
- Consistently monitoring community feedback in hotspot areas like Kano state can unveil any shifts or developments in the dissemination of rumors.

Zambia

Skepticism about HPV vaccine safety in Zambia

Engagement: **5 posts, 4.4k likes, 987 comments**

- The Ministry of Health in Zambia is conducting [a nationwide human papillomavirus \(HPV\) multi-age cohort vaccination campaign](#), scheduled to run from September 25th to September 30th.
- Online users who responded to the Ministry's update expressed a range of concerns, including skepticism regarding vaccine safety [[LINK](#), [LINK](#)] and [vaccine necessity](#), [sentiment of vaccine fatigue](#), [inquiry about eligibility to receive the vaccine](#), [request for further examination of girls' pads due to the sudden prevalence of the disease](#), [apprehensions about potential side effects of the vaccine](#), [drawing comparisons with COVID-19 vaccine side effects](#). Other online users requested that [awareness on male circumcision be highlighted so as to help women from being infected with HPV](#) and asked [whether HPV is a sexually transmitted disease or not](#).

Why is it concerning?

- According to the World Health Organization, "[Zambia ranks third globally in terms of cervical cancer cases, with 65.5 cases per 100,000 women, resulting in 43.4 deaths per 100,000 women](#)".

Cervical cancer stands as the predominant cancer type in Zambia, constituting 23% of all reported cancer cases. These statistics translate to approximately 3,100 new cases and 1,900 fatalities each year.

- A 2023 [study](#)¹ in Zambia revealed that girls had varying levels of knowledge about HPV and the HPV vaccine. While they generally held positive attitudes towards the vaccine, several barriers to vaccination were identified, including the requirement for parental consent, concerns about side effects, and misinformation about the vaccine.

What can we do?

- Addressing concerns and questions about HPV before commencing the vaccination campaign can mitigate a potential low vaccination uptake.
- A [video](#) from Viral Facts Africa that explains the risks of HPV infections can serve as a valuable resource for parents and girls seeking to understand the nature of cervical cancer. More communication initiatives, targeting and tailored for women are also needed to make sure women and girls receive the information they need about the disease and the vaccine.
- Based on a study² about medical doctors' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding HPV Vaccination, one of the recommendations is to [involve medical doctors in debunking myths and misconceptions about HPV vaccination](#). This can contribute to boosting vaccine uptake among the population.

Chad, South Sudan, Central African Republic

Measles outbreaks continue to affect populations displaced by the Sudan crisis.

Engagement: **23 posts, 479 likes, 41 comments**

Media narrative:

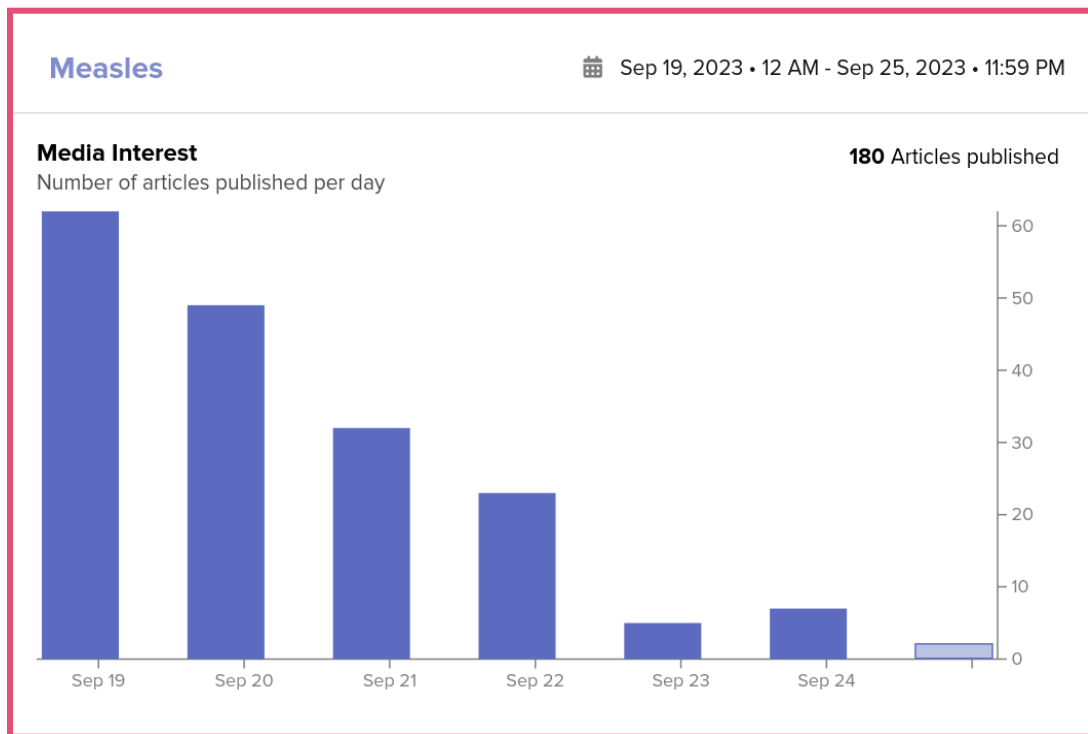
- This week, numerous online media agencies from the African region have amplified a [UNHCR report regarding the health and nutrition updates of the](#)

¹ Lubeya MK, Chibwesa CJ, Mwanahamuntu M, Mukosha M, Frank S and Kawonga M (2023) "When you get the HPV vaccine, it will prevent cervical cancer; it will act as a shield": adolescent girls' knowledge and perceptions regarding the human papillomavirus vaccine in Zambia. *Front. Health Serv.* 3:1208458. doi: 10.3389/frhs.2023.1208458

² Lubeya MK, Zekire Nyirenda JC, Chanda Kabwe J, Mukosha M. Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Towards Human Papillomavirus Vaccination Among Medical Doctors at a Tertiary Hospital: A Cross Sectional Study. *Cancer Control.* 2022 Jan-Dec;29:10732748221132646. doi: 10.1177/10732748221132646. PMID: 36214063; PMCID: PMC9558859

[Sudan crisis](#). More specifically, media articles referred to the same findings highlighted in the report “more than 1,200 refugee children have died in Sudan due to a measles outbreak and malnutrition”.

- According to online monitoring, a total of 62 media articles were published on September 19, coinciding with the release of the report. That included articles from countries affected by the displacement of individuals by the Sudan crisis [Central African Republic](#), [Chad](#) and [South Sudan](#). 30% of the articles published originated from Sudan.



The number of articles published per day extracted from Newswhip

Why is it concerning?

- While regional media outlets showed a higher interest in the consequences of the Sudan crisis, this interest has declined within a few days, as evidenced by the decline in coverage following the report's publication.
- There is a higher volume of such articles published by Sudanese news agencies compared to news agencies in neighboring countries that address the crisis.

What can we do?

- Re-engage with media outlets to cover the Sudan crisis in different ways, with original content, stories and other publications that can generate more interest from the public.

- The measles social media toolkit produced by [Viral Facts Africa](#) can be incorporated in the media's reporting on the crisis and can serve as a resource that covers questions and information gaps that might arise from parents displaced by the crisis.

Trends to watch

Resurgence of cholera in Malawi

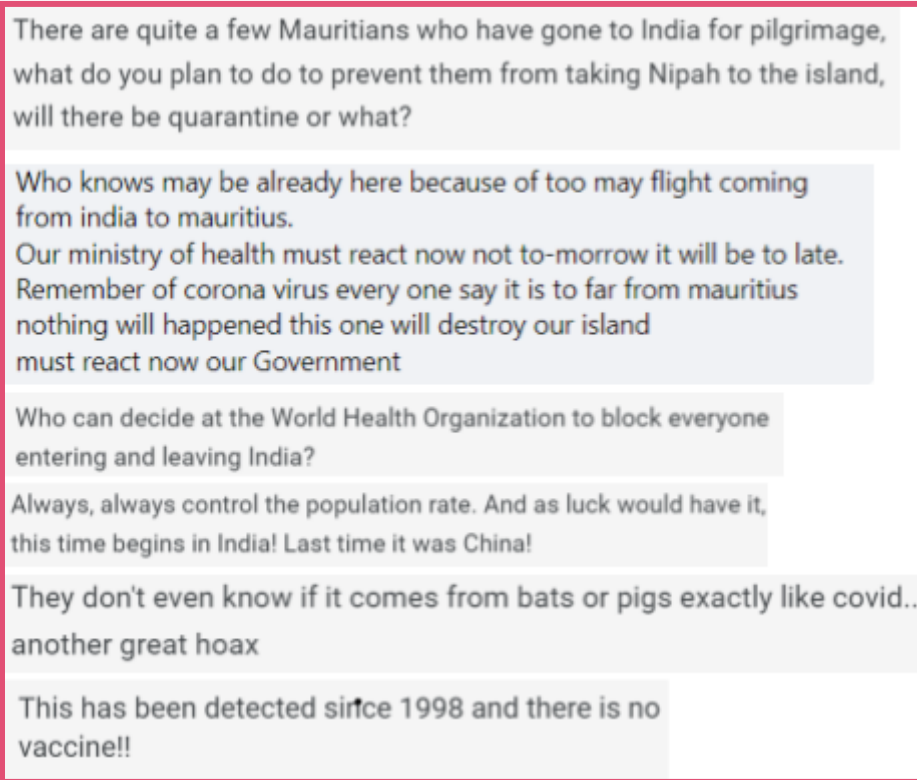
- In Malawi, [Times 360 Malawi](#) and [Zodiak online](#) amplified news about a cholera case reported in Karonga, near the Tanzanian border, which has triggered various reactions among online users. These included fatigue from continuous cholera announcements, especially after [the declaration of cholera as no longer a national public health emergency](#) and the surprise at the confirmation of cholera cases in September, given the hot season.
- Looking at the infodemic aspect, the previous cholera outbreak in Malawi gave rise to a significant influx of misinformation and disinformation. This included instances of [healthcare workers contributing to the spread of the outbreak](#), [rumors circulating about the treatment provided at cholera treatment facilities](#), and a widespread sense of skepticism regarding the effectiveness of cholera vaccines. Further announcement about cholera cases in Malawi might trigger similar reactions from communities.
- Ongoing monitoring of public reactions to posts about cholera cases can help communication specialists gauge whether the topic gains momentum and if there's a resurgence of misinformation. This will also assist in devising more effective communication strategies.

Mauritians worried over bat-born Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala, India

Engagement: **7 posts, 2.5k likes, 277 comments**

- Online media agencies in Mauritius, including Le Mauricien [[LINK](#), [LINK](#)], Defimedia.info [[LINK](#),[LINK](#), [LINK](#)], [L'express Maurice](#), and [TOP FM Mauritius](#), have amplified news concerning the [Nipah virus outbreak in Kerala, India](#).
- Mauritians are concerned about the possibility of cross-border transmission between the two countries due to the fact that approximately [30,000 Mauritians travel to India annually for various reasons](#).

- Additionally, there are comments suggesting skepticism, with some individuals hinting that the disease might be perceived as another hoax similar to COVID-19. Questions have arisen regarding the absence of a vaccine despite the early detection of the Nipah virus.



- According to WHO's fact sheet, [Nipah virus \(NiV\) infection is an emerging zoonotic disease which was first recognized in 1999](#).
- "Other regions may be at risk for infection, as evidence of the virus has been found in the known natural reservoir (Pteropus bat species) and several other bat species in several countries, including Ghana, Madagascar in the African region."

Key resources

Diphtheria

- [WHO](#) Diphtheria fact sheet
- [VFA](#), diphtheria social media toolkit

Cholera

- [WHO](#), Multi-country outbreak of cholera, External situation report #5
- [WHO](#), cholera outbreaks, W&A
- [WHO](#), Cholera fact sheet

- [VFA](#), cholera social media toolkit
- Social Science in Epidemics: [cholera lessons learned](#)
- [Global Task Force on Cholera Control](#), clarifying rumors and community concerns.

Measles

- [WHO](#), Measles fact sheet
- [VFA](#), Measles social media toolkit
- [WHO](#) literature on the risk of measles for children
- [UNICEF](#) immunization roadmap

HPV

- [VFA](#), HPV social media toolkit
- [WHO](#), Cervical cancer fact sheet
- [PAHO](#), HPV Explainer

Nipah virus

- [WHO](#), Nipah Virus fact sheet
- [ECDC](#), Nipah Virus Fact Sheet
- [India National Center of Disease Control](#), Nipah Virus management

Methodology

The social media listening process relies on a combination of social media analyses conducted for French, English, and Lusophone-speaking countries.

The social media analysis for French-speaking countries is conducted by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Guinea, the one for Lusophone-speaking countries by the AIRA Infodemic Manager Consultant based in Angola, and the one for English-speaking countries by a WHO AFRO social media officer.

The final report is a combination of the three analyses and recommendations.

The shift from a social media listening monitoring conducted by only one person for the whole African region into a combined one based on the analysis conducted by three different people may result in a less detailed and exhaustive report.

Engagements, otherwise known as interactions, **refer to the number of likes, comments, reactions, and re-shares on a post.**

This is not a perfect measure of engagement:

- Some may have seen the post and chosen not to interact with it;
- Commenting on or re-sharing a post may constitute a more meaningful form of engagement than simply reacting to it;

- We are not systematically distinguishing between the types of responses that each engagement generates (e.g. while a post may contain misinformation, people may be countering/ debunking it in the comments).

We seek to mitigate these limitations by:

- Scanning comments and monitoring reactions to qualitatively evaluate responses to each post;
- Assessing the velocity of a post (i.e. how fast is it obtaining reactions, likes, and shares) and the re-emergence of specific themes;
- Identifying whether the post is shared across a variety of platforms and sources (broad engagement), or simply soliciting a high level of attention within a given community/ platform (siloeed engagement).

The monitoring reports are produced using NewsWhip Analytics, Crowdtangle, Google Trends, and UNICEF Talkwalker dashboards as well as the WHO EPI-WIN weekly infodemic insight reports and the WHO EARS platform.

As a result, data may be biased towards data emerging from formal news outlets/ official social media pages and does not incorporate content circulating on closed platforms (e.g. Whatsapp) or groups (e.g. private Facebook groups).

We also rely on our fact-checking partners, who provide invaluable insights into relevant national and regional trends or content, as well as country-level reports, including the South Africa Social Listening Weekly Report and the Mali Social Listening Weekly Report.

In producing these summaries and recommendations, we have consulted community feedback survey reports, as well as monitoring and recommendations from AIRA partners. We also draw from WHO EPI-WIN weekly reports and UNICEF monthly reports to formulate recommendations. As we produce more content, we seek to triangulate and corroborate information across these groups to strengthen our infodemic response.