

AFAO BRIEFING: TERMINOLOGY WHEN REFERRING TO MONKEYPOX

25 January 2023

Executive summary

AFAO and ASHM advise sector and public organisations to use the term “mpox” when referring to monkeypox.

The following outlines the background for this advice and reasoning.

Commentators had concerns over the term ‘monkeypox’.

Scientists named monkeypox in Copenhagen in 1958. Per the standard naming procedure of the time for orthopoxviral pathogens, they named monkeypox after the animals in which the pathogen was initially identified – monkeys. This is despite the disease being more common in rodents than in primates.¹

Commentators have argued ‘monkeypox’ lacks racial and cultural sensitivity. A group of 30 scientists, led by African scientists, noted monkeypox nomenclature was discriminatory and stigmatising against Africa.² Previously, the two major groups of the monkeypox virus were known as the Congo Basin clade and the West African clade – they have since been renamed.³ Michael Toole, Associate Principal Research Fellow at the Burnet Institute, also notes monkeys are rarely associated with the Western world, and this association with the global South could be seen as problematic.⁴ This exacerbates the racial overtones of outlets using historical pictures of Africans to show monkeypox lesions, instead of pictures of patients from diverse cultures.

The WHO has since updated terminology.

On November 28, 2022, the WHO recommended to use of a new term “mpox” as a synonym for monkeypox. Both names will be used simultaneously for one year while “monkeypox” is phased out. The change was made following a series of consultations with global experts.

¹ Brittny Mejia, 26 Aug 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2022-08-26/many-say-the-name-is-racist-so-what-do-you-call-monkeypox#:~:text=The%20California%20Department%20of%20Public,to%20pick%20a%20new%20name.>

² Christian Happi et al, 11 June 2022, [https://virological.org/t/urgent-need-for-a-non-discriminatory-and-non-stigmatizing-nomenclature-for-monkeypox-virus/853.](https://virological.org/t/urgent-need-for-a-non-discriminatory-and-non-stigmatizing-nomenclature-for-monkeypox-virus/853)

³ World Health Organisation, 12 August 2022, [https://www.who.int/news/item/12-08-2022-monkeypox--experts-give-virus-variants-new-names.](https://www.who.int/news/item/12-08-2022-monkeypox--experts-give-virus-variants-new-names)

⁴ Michael Toole, 12 August 2022, [https://theconversation.com/why-doesnt-monkeypox-have-a-new-name-yet-188280.](https://theconversation.com/why-doesnt-monkeypox-have-a-new-name-yet-188280)