

Mali July

By Christine George

Weeks of leading a research team in West Africa in blistering summer heat test my grit. Electricity and running water are nowhere to be found. Sweltering nights offer scant relief from long days in the bush collecting infectious mosquitoes. My body is perpetually sodden with sweat and stink. The withering conditions are relentless.

Deadly viruses thrive in this environment. Many in Mali die needlessly. As we sit under a mango tree to escape the scorching rays of the late afternoon sun, I learn of a woman who had died two years ago – when she was my age. Her husband’s story is translated by our interpreter:

While working the fields with her family, she was bitten by what Malians call *real sosoni*, the small striped mosquito. Several days later, she became critically ill. The closest doctor was 85 kilometers and the only transportation an old bicycle. This young woman soon died of yellow fever.

The visceral impact of the husband’s words tightens my chest around my heart. The couple’s two small children are playing nearby. Anger wells up in me, knowing that their mother could have been saved by one of the oldest and most effective vaccines ever invented. Although my mind searches for words of comfort, my gut tells me that words are no substitute for action. Complacency is intolerable; morality and compassion compel me to fight the senseless repetition of such a tragic and unnecessary loss.