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## The zoonotic event of leishmaniasis in Portugal: a Public Health concern

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### Abstract

Leishmaniasis is a severe systemic parasitic disease that affects people, pets and wildlife. This disease manifests different clinical symptoms and is the result of an intracellular protozoan of the *Leishmania spp.* which is a disease very prevalent throughout the Mediterranean having markedly increased its presence in Portugal for the last years. It is certainly a disease of concern for public health.

Keywords: *Leishmania spp.*, zoonoses, Public Health

### Introduction

Leishmaniasis is a severe systemic parasitic disease that affects people, pets and wildlife in the world. This disease manifests different clinical symptoms and is the result of an intracellular protozoan of the *Leishmania spp.* kind (Harvey & Makeever, 2001). Leishmaniasis is transmitted by insects of the Phlebotomus kind (ordinarily and erroneously referred to as mosquitoes) that inhabits various geographic regions, especially the hot and humid areas of the globe, being epizootic in some countries such as the Mediterranean Ones (Anonymous 1, 2009). There are many species of *Leishmania*, but the main species responsible for disease in these countries is *Leishmania infantum* infecting dogs and rodents as primary reservoirs for visceral leishmaniasis (Almeida, 2009). Humans are considered to be accidental hosts for leishmania and can develop this disease with various degrees of severity (Nelson & Couto, 2003). Human leishmaniasis can be divided into 3 types according to the clinical manifestations: Cutaneous Leishmaniasis (CL), Mucocutaneous Leishmaniasis (CML) and Visceral Leishmaniasis (VL). Visceral leishmaniasis in humans, also known as "Kala-Azar", mainly affects children under 4 years of age, causing irregular fever, weight loss, anaemia, and increased volume of spleen and liver. Treatment is usually effective and allows definitive cure but, if not treated it can be fatal. The only exception applies to patients with severe immunodeficiency. (Anonymous 1, 2009). In Portugal, the expression of human leishmaniasis is not as exuberant as canine leishmaniasis. The number of cases reported annually to the Directorate General of Health has been of about 15 cases per year in the last years (table 1).

Despite these figures, human leishmaniasis has been increasing and has set in 2007 the highest incidence of the last decade (Figure 1).