

ANTONINO Well, I'm very happy to see that nontuberculous mycobacterial disease has come into the forefront and people
CATANZARO: are paying attention to it because it's been an issue, a problem, a disease for decades that I've been aware of and many others have as well, and it's been so under-recognized and pretty much ignored by much of the community. And it's been present forever.

And I first became aware of it when I started working with TB Control at CDC. And they, as you know-- well, I shouldn't say that. I started my work in the '60s with CDC, and it was focused on tuberculin skin testing. And it became very obvious as CDC started skin testing across the country that there's a huge population of people who react to nontuberculous mycobacteria that are a problem when it comes to understanding what tuberculin reactivity means.

For people who are not exposed to nontuberculous mycobacteria, it means TB infection. For people who are exposed to both nontuberculous mycobacteria and TB, it's a cross reaction and it can give a false positive. And so then, I first became aware of it back in the '60s. And only when I began to practice clinical medicine did it become apparent that this was a major problem.

And part of the issue that was a background issue making it a sleepy disease, something that we're not aware of, is that much of public health was focused on tuberculosis-- rightly so. But when a culture came up that was acid-fast. Something was growing, but it wasn't TB. Said, oh, thank goodness, it's not TB, and they would throw it away and forget about it. Obviously, that was a problem for people with nontuberculous mycobacterial disease because it added to the lack of awareness.

So over the years, this became an issue, and organizations like the American Thoracic Society and, more importantly, Info NTM started to focus on NTM as an issue of itself. And so the awareness of this as an issue, as a disease problem, has grown over the years. With that awareness growing, so has the recognition of the disease.

So now, NTM disease seems to be more common. Is it more common? I'm really not sure. I think it is, but it's certainly something we're more aware of. We encounter it much more commonly, partially because of this issue of discarding nontuberculous mycobacterial organisms when it comes up, but probably, more importantly, because of the common usage of CT examination.

So with Computer Tomography becoming more common, the abnormality of NTM disease has really come home. The tree and bud abnormality that is so common in NTM-- which is non-specific. It's present in a variety of chronic pulmonary diseases. But it's kind of the hallmark, if you will, of NTM. It's almost always present. Has been picked up when people come in for abdominal pain.

And they have a CT of the abdomen, and it picks up the bottom part of the lung, and then there's an abnormality that looks like it could be NTM. Then, awareness has increased and people have focused on-- do you have any disease? Because you've got this abnormality on CT. And the answer, quite commonly, has become yes. So people who've had mild chronic symptoms for years and years all of a sudden are being diagnosed.

And this is a good thing for people in general, and it's a good thing for medicine. It's added to the complexity, but it's good that we're diagnosing more NTM, and the treatment of NTM disease is becoming more standardized, more commonly aware. And of course, with the new drugs being approved specifically for NTM, there's a big increase in interest in this disease.