

AFAO BRIEFING: TERMINOLOGY WHEN REFERRING TO MONKEYPOX

12 September 2022

Executive summary

AFAO and ASHM advise sector and public organisations to use the following terms when referring to monkeypox:

- 'monkeypox' in external-facing documentation and media engagements; and
- 'MPX' in internal documentation.

This advice is contingent on upcoming guidance from the World Health Organisation (WHO) on the official name of the disease.

The following outlines the background for this advice and reasoning.

Commentators have concerns over the term 'monkeypox' and its derivatives.

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 is still finalising the disease's name.

The WHO, in collaboration with the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, identified best practices for the naming of new diseases.⁵ Among these guidelines for disease names, the WHO avoids geographic locations (like in the case of Murray Valley encephalitis and Spanish flu) and the names of species (like in the case of swine flu and bird flu). Australia is a WHO Member State.

The International Classification of Diseases, a comprehensive catalogue of health disorders maintained by the WHO, will finalise the illness' name by the end of the year.⁶ The WHO has engaged broadly over the name change;

however, media reports the committee will likely choose *Orthopoxvirus monkeypox*.⁷ Commentators note this name does not align with best practice.⁸

Australian stakeholders should continue to use monkeypox for external stakeholders and MPX for internal stakeholders until otherwise instructed by WHO.

In Australia, recent media attention and government messaging suggests there is high name recognition of the term, monkeypox, within the community. For the sake of consistency, and to avoid confusion, AFAO and ASHM advises sector and public organisations will continue to use monkeypox in all public-facing engagement. This reflects the importance of maintaining clarity in all community engagements regarding monkeypox.

For internal documentation, organisations are free to utilise the common abbreviation MPX as internal stakeholders have more awareness of the meaning of the abbreviation.

¹ Brittney 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>.

³ World Health Organisation, 12 August 2022, <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>.

⁵ World Health Organisation, 15 May 2015, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-HSE-FOS-15.1>.

⁶ Brittney 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>.

⁷ Hannah Doctor-loeb, 9 Aug 2022, <https://slate.com/technology/2022/08/monkeypox-name-discourse-who-stigma-mpv-mpx.html>.

⁸ Michael Toole, 12 August 2022, <https://theconversation.com/why-doesnt-monkeypox-have-a-new-name-yet-188280>.