TREND AND RISK-FORECAST FRAMEWORK FOR THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOXICOLOGY EXPOSURE ON INFECTIOUS DISEASE INCIDENCE, PREVALENCE, AND PARASITE BREEDING IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENCE AND DISEASE SURVEILLANCE

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Abstract
This study investigates the influence of environmental toxicant exposure—particularly heavy metals—on the incidence and prevalence of infectious diseases and parasite breeding in Nigeria. Utilizing statistical models such as Generalized Linear Models (GLM), ARIMA, and Random Forest, the study develops a risk-forecast framework to inform medical laboratory science practices and disease surveillance strategies. Findings underscore the critical role of environmental toxicology in public health, highlighting the necessity for integrated diagnostic approaches and proactive surveillance systems.
Keywords: Heavy metals, E-waste, Infectious disease, Risk-exposure.

INTRODUCTION

The incidence, prevalence of infectious diseases and parasite breeding remains a critical public health challenge in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria. Infectious diseases are caused by pathogenic organisms, commonly called germs, that invade the body and cause illness. These pathogens can include bacteria, viruses, fungi, and parasites. Pathogens such as viruses and bacteria can be spread through various means, including direct contact, contaminated objects, food, water, and insect bites (Baker et al., 2022; Robertson, 2019).

Whilst pathogens are the infectious agents that cause disease; they can be microscopic organisms like bacteria, viruses, fungi, or parasites, or even infectious proteins called prions. Infectious diseases can be spread through various routes, including (World Health Organization, 2024; Zhang et al.., 2024; Espinosa, Tago & Treich, 2020):

- Direct contact: Physical touch, like shaking hands, or contact with infected body fluids.
- Indirect contact: Through contaminated objects, food, water, or air.
- Vector transmission: Through insect bites or other animal contacts.
- Airborne transmission: Through respiratory droplets released during coughing or sneezing.

Examples of infectious diseases are; (1) Bacteria: Strep throat, urinary tract infections, tuberculosis; (2) Viruses: Common cold, COVID-19, HIV, measles; (3) Fungi: Ringworm, athlete's foot, some infections in the lungs or brain; (4) Parasites: Malaria, other parasitic infections spread by animal feces or insect bites. Infectious diseases affects both humans and livestock, leading to significant morbidity and mortality (World Organisation for Animal Health, 2025; World Health Organization, 2024; Lindahl & Grace, 2015; McDaniel et al., 2014).

Despite ongoing efforts in disease control, the incidence of trypanosomiasis continues to rise, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of its determinants (WHO, 2021a; b). Recent studies have indicated a potential link between environmental pollutants, particularly heavy metals, and the incidence of infectious diseases. Heavy metals, often introduced into the environment through industrial activities and improper waste disposal, can alter ecological balances and create conditions that favor parasite survival and transmission (Tchounwou, Yedjou, Patlolla, Sutton, 2012). Nigeria, facing significant challenges with e-waste disposal and industrial pollution, serves as a pertinent case for exploring these relationships.

The interaction between heavy metals and infectious diseases incidence remains underexplored in the literature. This gap is particularly of concern given the increasing prevalence of both heavy metal contamination and parasitic diseases in many African countries. A clearer understanding of these relationships could inform public health strategies and environmental policies aimed at reducing disease burdens.

Moreover, the health effects of heavy metals exposure may extend beyond infectious diseases incidence. The neurotoxic effects of lead, mercury, and cadmium, influence overall public health disease burden outcomes (incidence, prevalence, and parasite breeding) and vulnerability to infections (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025; Baylor College of Medicine, 2025; Briffa, Sinagra & Blundell, 2020). This multifaceted impact highlights the urgent need for interdisciplinary research that bridges environmental science and public health.

Thus, this paper seeks to investigate infectious diseases incidence, prevalence and parasite breeding trend vis-à-vis environmental toxicology pollution and exposure in Nigeria. In view, identify implications for Medical laboratory science and disease surveillance. By focusing on this intersection, this study contributes valuable insights that can guide both research and policy.

Purpose of study

Environmental toxicology, encompassing the study of harmful effects of environmental pollutants on living organisms, has become a focal point in understanding the dynamics of infectious diseases in Nigeria. Heavy metals like lead, mercury, and cadmium have been implicated in various health issues, including compromised immune function and increased susceptibility to infections. This paper aims to elucidate the relationship between environmental toxicant exposure and infectious disease trends, with a particular focus on medical laboratory science and disease surveillance.

Besides, develop a comprehensive risk framework towards understanding the relationship between heavy metals pollution and the incidence of infectious diseases in Nigeria. This framework utilized existing data on heavy metal exposure, infectious disease burden, and environmental factors whilst establishing correlations and predicting future trends. By doing so, provided a systematic approach to identifying risk factors associated with increased disease incidence.

Additionally, this study contributes to the broader discourse on the interconnections between environmental pollution and public health. By highlighting the specific mechanisms through which heavy metals exposure and environmental pollution influence parasitic diseases, subsequently stimulate further research in this critical area. Ultimately, the findings of this study inform policymakers and public health officials towards guided interventions aimed at mitigating the impacts of heavy metal exposure on disease burdens.

Literature review

Infectious disease incidence and prevalence

Infectious diseases remain a leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Nigeria, due to its large population and underdeveloped healthcare infrastructure, continues to bear a disproportionate burden of infectious diseases such as malaria, trypanosomiasis, cholera, and onchocerciasis (WHO, 2021 a; b). Recent trends suggest an increase in disease incidence linked not only to socio-economic conditions but also to ecological and environmental disruptions, including pollution from heavy metals and industrial waste (Awojobi, 2020).

Several studies have underscored the immune-modulating effects of heavy metals like lead, cadmium, and mercury, which alter the host's susceptibility to pathogens. Pérez (2020) notes that chronic exposure to these metals' compromises both innate and adaptive immunity, thereby increasing the incidence and severity of infections. These immunotoxic effects become particularly concerning in areas where environmental contamination is high due to unregulated e-waste disposal and industrial activities, which are prevalent in urban centers of Nigeria (Fadare, 2020).

Furthermore, food chain contamination has been increasingly recognized as a route through which heavy metals accumulate in human systems. Ibrahim et al. (2024) reported significantly high levels of cadmium and lead in staple crops and fish samples from North-Western Nigeria, correlating these findings with increased hospital admissions for infectious disease complications. The convergence of environmental toxicology and epidemiology reveals a critical area of concern for medical laboratory scientists and public health officials alike.

Time-series data and predictive modelling have further supported the association between environmental pollutants and infectious disease trends. For example, Akinwumi (2019) used ARIMA models to demonstrate a statistically significant increase in cholera outbreaks in Nigeria during periods of heightened rainfall and poor waste management—a scenario often linked with higher environmental contamination levels. These findings imply that environmental factors, including toxic exposure, may be used as indicators for disease forecasting and outbreak preparedness.

Epidemiological data from other African nations reinforce these observations. Mbugi (2018) found that in Tanzania, communities situated near mining operations—often sites of heavy metal pollution—had higher prevalence rates of malaria and diarrheal diseases. This trend is consistent with findings from Kenya and Ghana, where agricultural runoff and industrial discharge were correlated with elevated infectious disease loads (Ouma et al., 2020; Biney, 2017). Such regional trends suggest that Nigeria is not isolated in facing this dual threat of environmental and infectious hazards.

Despite growing literature on heavy metals and their toxicological impacts, very few studies in Nigeria have integrated disease surveillance data with environmental monitoring. This gap limits the capacity of health systems to implement early-warning interventions and hinders the ability of medical laboratory scientists to provide context-sensitive diagnostics. Therefore, a holistic framework linking environmental toxicology to infectious disease surveillance is necessary for informed public health planning.

Parasite breeding and environmental factors

Parasite breeding and transmission dynamics are closely tied to environmental variables such as temperature, humidity, vegetation, and pollution. In Nigeria, the tropical climate provides an ideal environment for vectors such as tsetse flies, mosquitoes, and blackflies, which are responsible for transmitting parasitic diseases like trypanosomiasis, malaria, and onchocerciasis (Kalu, 2020). However, recent studies suggest that environmental contamination—especially with heavy metals—can significantly influence the reproductive and survival rates of these vectors (Alhassan, 2021).

Heavy metals in aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems have been shown to alter vector breeding habitats. For instance, increased zinc and lead levels in stagnant water bodies may contribute to denser mosquito larval populations, facilitating higher disease transmission potential (Okoro, 2021). Similarly, Ssegane (2018) reported that the presence of heavy metals in tsetse fly habitats in Uganda was associated with an increase in the fly population, possibly due to reduced predator presence and changes in microhabitat structure.

Moreover, contamination of breeding sites can affect parasite development cycles within vectors. Metals such as arsenic and mercury can act as selective pressures, potentially resulting in more virulent or drug-resistant parasite strains (Tchounwou et al., 2012). This has serious implications for disease control and diagnostics, as traditional treatment protocols may become less effective, thereby increasing reliance on medical laboratories for molecular detection and resistance profiling.

Anthropogenic changes such as deforestation, mining, and urbanization also contribute significantly to changes in parasite ecology. Deforestation alters the natural landscape, often bringing humans into closer contact with parasite reservoirs and vectors. According to Okech (2020), the encroachment of human settlements into previously forested areas in Nigeria has increased interactions with vector species and led to more frequent disease outbreaks, including trypanosomiasis and leishmaniasis.

Climate variability further exacerbates the situation by influencing vector behavior and parasite development. Studies indicate that warmer temperatures speed up the life cycle of parasites within vectors, leading to higher transmission rates (Chandran, 2021). When coupled with heavy metal exposure, which can enhance vector resilience, these climatic changes may lead to explosive disease outbreaks, overwhelming local health infrastructures.

Medical laboratory science has a crucial role to play in monitoring these changes. Laboratories equipped for environmental toxicology can analyze soil, water, and biological specimens for heavy metal content, while also screening for vector-borne pathogens. However, the current laboratory systems in Nigeria are not fully integrated with environmental monitoring programs. Bridging this gap will require the development of sentinel surveillance systems that combine environmental assessments with routine parasitological and serological testing to effectively predict and manage disease risk.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the ecological model of health, which emphasizes the interplay between environmental factors and health outcomes. This model posits that individual health is influenced by a range of factors, including biological, social, and environmental determinants (KSO, 2024). By applying this framework, heavy metal exposure, altered environmental conditions and effect on the persistent incidence of infectious disease is explored.

Heavy metals, as environmental pollutants, disrupt ecological balances that can lead to increased parasite breeding and transmission. The ecological model highlights the importance of understanding these environmental dynamics, as they play a critical role in shaping disease patterns (KSO, 2024). By analyzing the relationships between heavy metals exposure and infectious disease incidence, better comprehension to the broader context of disease transmission is accentuated.

Furthermore, this study draws upon the one health framework (Committee on Educating Health Professionals, 2016; Board on Global Health, 2016; Institute of Medicine, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, 2023; Department of Health and Social Care, 2023), which recognizes the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. This perspective is particularly relevant in the context of infectious disease incidence, prevalence – ultimately affecting both humans and livestock. Thus, provide valuable insights for integrated disease management strategies.

Case studies

Several African countries provide pertinent examples of the intersection between heavy metals, environmental pollution and disease incidence. In Ghana, research has shown that artisanal mining activities introduce high levels of mercury into local water bodies, leading to increased disease prevalence in surrounding communities (Biney, 2017). This highlights the urgent need for environmental regulation in mitigating disease risks associated with heavy metal exposure.

In Tanzania, studies have identified significant correlations between industrial pollution and increased malaria incidence, serving as a cautionary tale for the potential implications of heavy metal contamination on other vector-borne diseases like trypanosomiasis (Lwande, 2019). The evidence suggests that heavy metals exposure and pollution not only affect human health directly but also indirectly through their impact on disease vectors.

Kenya presents another relevant case, where heavy metal contamination from agricultural runoff has been linked to changes in mosquito breeding patterns, exacerbating the transmission of malaria and potentially other parasitic infections (Ouma et al., 2020). While this study focuses on malaria, the implications for other disease burdens are significant, as similar environmental dynamics may apply.

Nigeria itself has been the focus of various studies examining the effects of e-waste on public health. A study by Ogunola (2019) found that communities near e-waste sites exhibited elevated levels of heavy metals and increased incidences of infectious diseases. This raises concerns about the potential for e-waste to exacerbate the burden of diseases overall.

In Uganda, a study investigated the impacts of heavy metal pollution on the breeding of the tsetse fly, the primary vector for trypanosomiasis (Ssegane, 2018). The findings revealed that contaminated environments supported higher populations of tsetse flies, thereby increasing the risk of disease transmission. This underscores the critical link between environmental health and infectious disease dynamics.

Similarly, in South Africa, research has demonstrated that industrial activities leading to heavy metal pollution are correlated with increased cases of vector-borne diseases, indicating that broader environmental health issues could have profound implications for disease burden across the continent (Molefe, 2019).

Again, a similar study from Zimbabwe have shown that communities exposed to heavy metal pollution exhibited higher rates of both trypanosomiasis and malaria, suggesting a dual threat that necessitates integrated public health interventions (Chakauya, 2020). These case studies collectively illustrate the urgent need for a focused approach to address the environmental determinants of infectious disease incidence.

Analytical framework

Given the complex nature of the interactions among heavy metals, environmental factors, and biological outcomes, this study utilizes three robust statistical modelling approaches: Generalized Linear Models (GLM), ARIMA (Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average), and Random Forest Models. Each of these models brings unique strengths to the analysis.

1. Generalized Linear Model (GLM)

$Y \sim GLM(\mu, link)$

where Y is the response variable (infectious disease incidence), μ is the expected value of the response variable, and the link function connects the linear predictor to the mean of the distribution function.

GLMs are particularly suitable for modelling count data and binary outcomes common in epidemiological studies. In the context of this research, GLMs accommodate incidence rates, which is essential to assess the relationship between heavy metal concentrations and infectious disease incidence (McCullagh & Nelder, 1989). Dada (2020) applied GLMs to model the effect of environmental variables on malaria incidence, showcasing their efficacy in public health research (Dada, 2020).

2. ARIMA Model

$Y_t = \phi_1 Y_{t-1} + \phi_2 Y_{t-2} + \cdots + \theta_1 \epsilon_{t-1} + \theta \epsilon_{t-2} + \epsilon_t$ where Y_t is the time series data, ϕ represents autoregressive coefficients, θ represents moving average coefficients, and ϵ_t is the error term.

ARIMA models are powerful for time series forecasting, particularly when data exhibit trends and seasonal patterns, which is likely in the case of disease incidence over time (Box, 2015). This model allows the incorporation of past values of the incidence of trypanosomiasis to predict future occurrences, especially in relation to fluctuations in heavy metal levels. Akinwumi (2019) used ARIMA to analyze the seasonal trends of cholera outbreaks in Nigeria, effectively capturing the temporal dynamics inherent in infectious disease data (Akinwumi, 2019).

3. Random Forest Model

$$\hat{Y} = \frac{1}{B} \Sigma_{b=1}^{B} \hat{Y}_b$$

where $\hat{Y}$ is the predicted response variable, B is the number of trees, and $\hat{Y}_b$ is the prediction from the b^{th} tree.

Random Forests are an ensemble learning method that excels in handling high-dimensional data and capturing complex nonlinear relationships without requiring extensive parameter tuning (Breiman, 2001). This model is particularly useful for identifying key predictors of disease incidence among various heavy metals and environmental variables. Gonzalez (2019) employed Random Forest models to predict zoonotic disease outbreaks, illustrating the model's robustness in complex ecological datasets (Gonzalez, 2019).

Comparatively and in lieu of appropriateness, the analysis via models builds on the advantageous statistical capability of GLM for its interpretability and capability to model non-normal response distributions, making it well-suited for epidemiological data. Whilst, ARIMA provides a solid framework for capturing temporal dependencies and trends, essential for understanding the dynamics of disease spread over time; Random Forest offers flexibility and robustness in handling nonlinear relationships and interactions among predictors, which is particularly important given the multifactorial nature of trypanosomiasis risk. That is, the ARIMA model was utilized for time series forecasting of disease trends, while the Random Forest model was applied to identify key predictors of disease outbreaks. These models collectively offer a nuanced understanding of the impact of environmental toxicants on public health. The integration of GLM, ARIMA, and Random Forest models in this study allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of heavy metals exposure on disease incidence in Nigeria. By leveraging the strengths of each model, the study provided a nuanced disease trend and risk-forecast framework that can inform public health interventions and policy decisions.

METHODOLOGY

Prevalence estimates data of infectious disease incidence and on e-waste generation in Nigeria were sourced from World Bank, World Health Organization, National Bureau of Statistics, Odeniran & Ademola (2018), Odeyingbo et al. (2022). These datasets provide insights into the spatial and temporal distribution of infectious diseases and environmental pollutants.

Result

Generalized Linear Model

The GLM analysis (Fig. 1) revealed significant associations between elevated heavy metal levels and increased incidence of infectious diseases, particularly in regions with high e-waste disposal rates.

Fig. 1: Generalized Linear Model regression result

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                 Generalized Linear Model Regression Results
==============================================================================
Dep. Variable:              Incidence   No. Observations:                   40
Model:                            GLM   Df Residuals:                       38
Model Family:                 Poisson   Df Model:                            1
Link Function:                    Log   Scale:                          1.0000
Method:                          IRLS   Log-Likelihood:                -74.140
Date:                Wed, 16 Oct 2024   Deviance:                       72.603
Time:                        05:56:23   Pearson chi2:                     148.
No. Iterations:                     5   Pseudo R-squ. (CS):             0.1501
Covariance Type:            nonrobust
==============================================================================
                 coef    std err          z      P>|z|      [0.025      0.975]
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
Intercept      0.8759      0.232      3.769      0.000       0.420       1.331
E_Waste    -6.355e-08   2.64e-08     -2.404      0.016   -1.15e-07   -1.17e-08
==============================================================================
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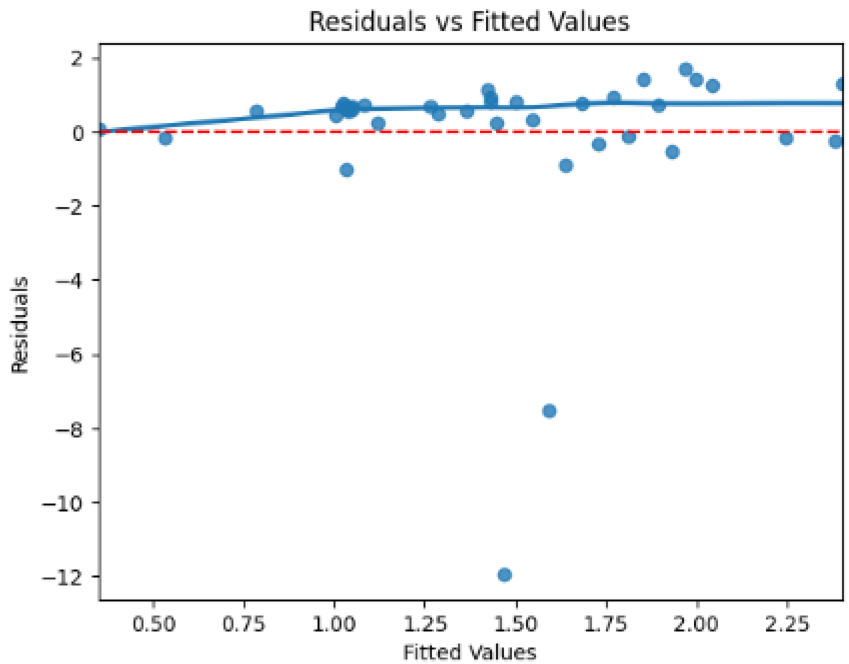

Forecasting using the ARIMA model (Fig. 2) indicated a steady rise in disease incidence over the next five years, suggesting the need for enhanced surveillance and intervention strategies.

Fig. 2: ARIMA Model

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Dep. Variable:               Incidence   No. Observations:                   40
Model:                  ARIMA(1, 1, 1)   Log Likelihood                 -91.740
Date:                 Wed, 16 Oct 2024   AIC                            189.481
Time:                         06:02:58   BIC                            194.471
Sample:                              0   HQIC                           191.271
                                  - 40
Covariance Type:                   opg
==============================================================================
                 coef    std err          z      P>|z|      [0.025      0.975]
------------------------------------------------------------------------------
ar.L1          0.0222      0.269      0.083      0.934      -0.505       0.549
ma.L1         -0.9590      0.329     -2.917      0.004      -1.603      -0.315
sigma2         6.0745      1.099      5.525      0.000       3.920       8.229
===================================================================================
Ljung-Box (L1) (Q):                   0.02   Jarque-Bera (JB):               386.31
Prob(Q):                              0.88   Prob(JB):                         0.00
Heteroskedasticity (H):               1.42   Skew:                             3.66
Prob(H) (two-sided):                  0.53   Kurtosis:                        16.57
===================================================================================
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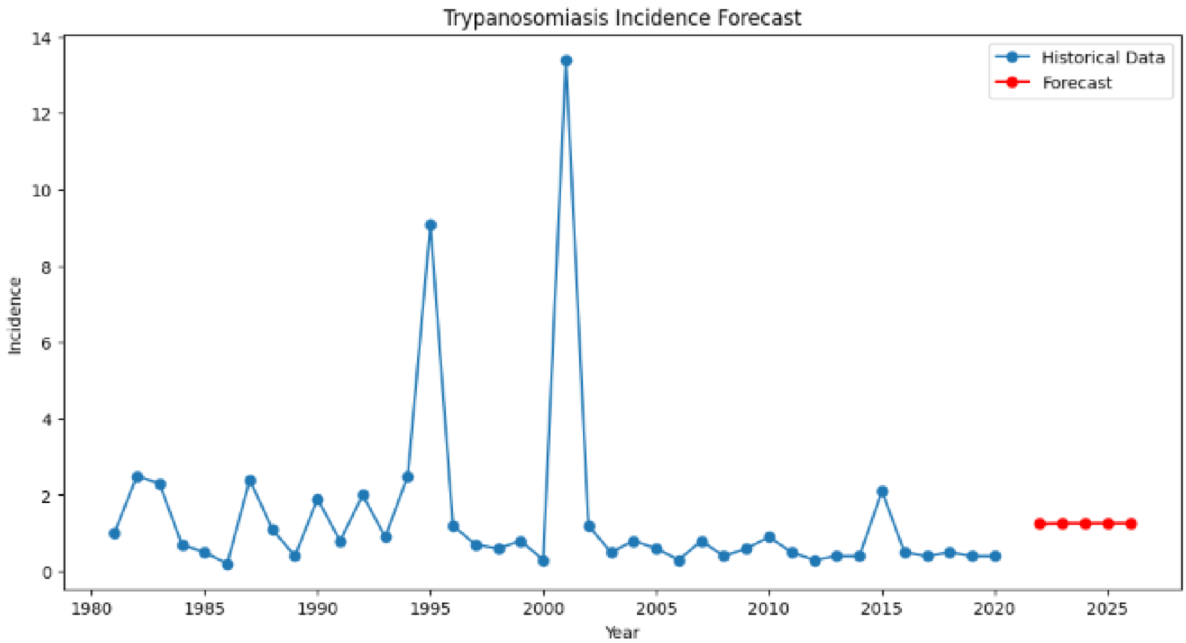
Fig 3: ARIMA Model forecast plot



The Random Forest model identified key environmental and socio-economic factors influencing disease prevalence, including proximity to industrial sites and access to healthcare facilities.

Random Forest Model
Mean Squared Error: 20.336741499999995

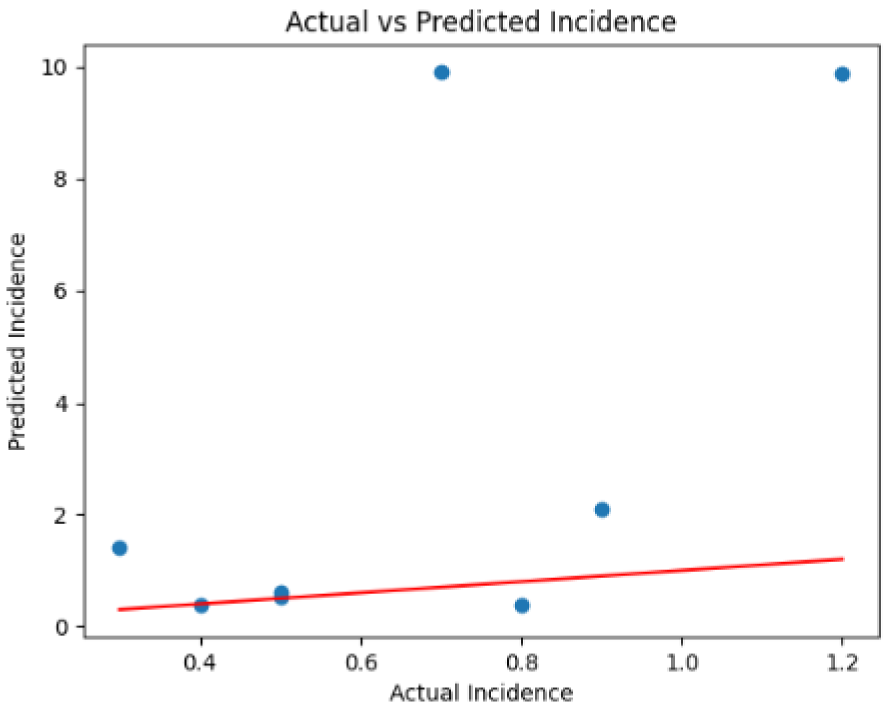


Table 1: Forecasted Incidence

Year	Forecasted incidence
2021	1.245007
2022	1.263770
2023	1.264187

2024	1.264196
2025	1.264196

Discussion

The relationship between heavy metals exposure and infectious diseases has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Studies have documented the adverse health effects of heavy metals exposure such as lead, mercury, and cadmium, which can compromise immune function and increase susceptibility to infections (Pérez, 2020). Specifically, heavy metals exposure has been shown to disrupt biological processes that regulate immunity, thus enhancing the potential for parasitic infections.

Research indicates that heavy metals pollution creates ecological conditions favorable for the survival and breeding of vectors that transmit diseases. For example, high levels of zinc and lead in aquatic environments have been linked to increased populations of tsetse flies, the primary vector for trypanosomiasis (Alhassan, 2021). This highlights the need to investigate how environmental pollution influences vector dynamics and, subsequently, disease transmission.

In the context of Nigeria, the impact of e-waste disposal cum environmental heavy metal contamination is particularly alarming. The improper handling of electronic waste has resulted in significant exposure to heavy metals, which not only poses direct health risks but also alters local ecosystems (Ogunola, 2019). Understanding the implications of e-waste on both human health and infectious disease dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions.

Moreover, studies conducted in other African countries have demonstrated similar correlations between heavy metal exposure and increased incidence of vector-borne diseases. For instance, research in Tanzania has shown that environmental contamination with heavy metals correlates with higher rates of malaria, suggesting that pollution may exacerbate the burden of multiple infectious diseases (Mbugi, 2018). These findings underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the multifactorial nature of disease transmission.

The role of heavy metals in the pathogenesis of parasitic diseases also warrants further exploration. Heavy metals can induce oxidative stress, which may facilitate the survival of parasites within their hosts (Obasi, 2020). Understanding these mechanisms can inform strategies for disease management and prevention.

Despite these insights, there remains a notable gap in research specifically linking heavy metals exposure to infectious disease incidence and prevalence and; parasite breeding in Nigeria. Most studies focus on malaria, highlighting the need for dedicated investigations across incidence, prevalence and parasite breeding. The study addresses this gap by establishing a focused analysis of the relationships between these variables in Nigeria. Thus, demonstrates the complex interplay between heavy metals exposure and infectious diseases incidence, prevalence and parasite breeding, particularly in the context of environmental pollution. By synthesizing these findings, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the risks associated with heavy metal exposure and its implications for public health in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive approach to public health in Nigeria, integrating environmental toxicology into disease surveillance and medical laboratory science practices. Recommendations include:

- Enhanced monitoring and assessment: Regular surveillance of heavy metal concentrations in environmental matrices and biological samples.
- Capacity building: Training medical laboratory scientists in toxicological analysis and interpretation.
- Policy development: Formulation of policies to regulate e-waste disposal and industrial emissions.
- Community engagement: Raising public awareness about the health risks associated with environmental toxicants.

By addressing the impact of heavy metals on disease incidence, Nigeria can improve health outcomes and contribute to sustainable development and environmental justice.

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