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Hong Kong health chief falls ill with suspected SARS virus

With the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) entering its third week, by March 24 the patient toll in Hong Kong reached 260 confirmed cases and five cases yet to be confirmed. One of those with suspected illness is William Ho, chief executive of the Hong Kong Hospital Authority, which runs all 44 public hospitals and clinics. Ho was admitted to hospital on March 23 with suspected pneumonia and other symptoms consistent with the disease, although his exact illness has not been diagnosed.

So far, ten people have died in the outbreak, which was recognised on March 8 when three hospital staff of the Prince of Wales Hospital developed atypical pneumonia. Four Hong Kong schools where six pupils have been confirmed with the disease were also shut for 1 week as the government struggled to curb the spread of the virus. And more than 180 students whose family members were infected hospital workers have been suspended from attending classes.

The virus is believed to be spread by droplets from an infected person’s coughs or sneezes, and its incubation period is 2–7 days. Epidemiological studies by the Department of Health found that the global outbreak was connected to a mainland doctor, who had been sick in his native Guangzhou City before arriving in Hong Kong on Feb 21.

The 64-year-old doctor infected guests and visitors at his hotel, and by Feb 22, he was admitted to a hospital where he died on March 4.

An American-Chinese businessman who flew on to Hanoi, three Singaporeans, two Canadians, and a Hong Kong airport worker who visited the hotel were also infected. The guests in turn sparked outbreaks of SARS in their respective countries.

The airport worker triggered the Hong Kong outbreak when he was admitted to Prince of Wales Hospital on March 5.

The isolation of the virus by the Hong Kong laboratory is a major step towards development of a diagnostic test, said Shigeru Omi, WHO’s regional director for the Western Pacific.

“However, we should not get carried away”, he said. “These are preliminary results only. Further studies are needed before it can be concluded, with confidence, that the causative agent of SARS has been identified.”

“The SARS virus travels at the speed of a jumbo jet. Its potential to spread and cause harm is obvious”, he said.

Mary Ann Benitez

SARS virus claims its third victim in Canada

Although Canadian scientists and WHO believe they are closing in on the virus responsible for severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the number of Canadians suspected to have died from the mysterious disease has increased to three after health officials classified an elderly man’s death on March 22 as a probable case of SARS.

A further 11 people in Canada may be infected with the virus, and, as of March 24, the virus had killed 17 people worldwide and infected more than 450.

On March 22, researchers from the University of Hong Kong’s microbiology department succeeded in isolating the virus from the lung tissue of a patient with SARS. Meanwhile, scientists at the National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg announced that genetic testing had revealed that human metapneumovirus was present in specimens from six of eight cases they studied.

The metapneumovirus is part of the paramyxoviridae family that triggers measles, mumps, pneumonia, and the common cold.

First discovered in 2001 by scientists in the Netherlands and previously linked to an outbreak of respiratory illness in Quebec in 2002, the virus usually causes mild respiratory illness. But scientists believe that the virus has mutated into one that produces much more severe symptoms.

“I think it is somewhat reassuring that it is a virus we’ve seen before”, National Microbiology Laboratory scientific director Frank Plummer told reporters. “But important questions remain about why this is so virulent.” Plummer suggested that the increased virulence could be the product of the virus interacting with another infectious agent in humans, such as a bacterium.

WHO predicts that a network of scientists at 11 laboratories in ten countries are within weeks of developing a test to easily identify whether people are infected with SARS. In addition, a team of experts from five countries has been dispatched to China “to investigate the possibility that an outbreak of a disease having similar symptoms and affecting similar groups—health-care workers and close contacts of patients—may be linked to the current SARS outbreak”.

WHO and Health Canada have issued emergency travel advice for Asia, and Health Canada has dispatched medical staff to international airports in Toronto and Vancouver to help airline workers monitor incoming travellers from Hong Kong and Singapore for SARS symptoms.

Wayne Kondro

Members of the public have been alarmed by the SARS outbreak

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