NEWS ON OUTBREAK AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES

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IN BELGIUM

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Belgium: update

Up to April 22, no suspected or probable cases of SARS have been identified in Belgium. The 11 cases reported by physicians as possible cases of SARS have been discarded as they did not correspond to the case definition or because another etiology has been found that can fully explain their symptoms. PCR coronavirus tests performed so far on presumed cases by the KUL laboratory were negative.

On April 22, the Belgian government has released new travel advices. It recommends postponing all non-essential travels to the whole of China (including Hong Kong SAR), Singapore, Hanoi (Vietnam) and Toronto (Canada). See press release on http://www.health.fgov.be/AGP/devices_alert/SARS/FR/SARS-frame_index.html

The call center at the Federal Public Service of Public Health is still functional during weekdays, from 9 AM to 5 PM (02/501.40.00 (Fr) and 02/501.40.01 (NL)). An updated letter has been sent on April 18 to all hospitals and medical doctors in Belgium, with latest information and recommendations.

Further information is available to the general public and to health professionals on the Federal Public Service of Public Health website (http://www.health.fgov.be/). See further information on SARS below, under “In the rest of the world”. Sources: Federal Public Service of Public Health and IPH.

Avian influenza in poultry and preventive measures for humans

According to the Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (AFSCA/FAVV), cases of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) have been reported in four farms in the provinces of Limburg and Antwerp up to April 22. The disease has spilled in Belgium over from the Netherlands and affected areas are adjacent to the Dutch border. All poultry within a 3-km radius of the affected farms have been slaughtered and the transport of live poultry and hatching eggs to other European countries has been banned.

On April 20, after avian influenza (H7N7) has been suspected to cause the death of a veterinarian in the Netherlands, the Federal Public Service of Public Health in Belgium has advised additional measures to protect persons in contact with infected poultry. Besides influenza immunization (to reduce the risk of virus recombination between human and animal influenza viruses) and protective equipment already recommended, antiviral preventive treatment has been recommended during contact with infected poultry and in the following 10 days. A letter has been sent to all general physicians with these recommendations. The persons being in contact with infected poultry and...
Presenting with conjunctivitis and flu-like syndrome must receive anti-viral treatment. Specimen of these cases should be sent to the KUL virology laboratory for influenza testing. A call center has also been established, where experts from the AFSCA/FAVV and medical experts can answer to the questions from the public (0800/13 550). Sources: AFSCA/FAAV (http://www.afsca.be/indexfr.htm), Federal Public Service of Public Health (http://www.health.fgov.be/) and Promed http://www.promedmail.org

IN THE REST OF THE WORLD

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) worldwide: update

Up to April 21, the WHO reported a cumulative number of 3861 cases including 217 deaths (case fatality rate of 5.6%). The majority of cases are occurring in China (51%) and Hong Kong (36%). Since the last update dated April 8, new cases have been reported in India (1), Indonesia (1), Japan (1), Kuwait (1), Mongolia (3), Philippines (2), and South Africa (1).

In China, the Chinese minister of Health and the mayor of Beijing have been dismissed as a result of the disinformation about the SARS situation and lack of collaboration. In Beijing 448 cases were reported up to April 21, and they have been reports of new cases in several other Chinese provinces.

In Hong Kong, the results of an extensive investigation of an unusual cluster of SARS cases concentrated in the Amoy Gardens housing has been released. The sewage contaminated with SARS virus has been the probable point source of infection.

Scientists are also working to determine the amount of time the virus can survive in the environment on both dry surfaces and in suspension, including in faecal matter. Experiences confirm abundant early evidence that the SARS virus spreads, in the vast majority of cases, through exposure to respiratory droplets during close face-to-face contact.

The genome of the virus has been unveiled. No specific treatment has been identified yet. Sources: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org) and WHO (http://www.who.int)

Avian influenza: human cases in the Netherlands

A total of 82 human cases of conjunctivitis due to the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H7N7 have been reported in the Netherlands where the outbreak is ongoing since the end of February. The majority of these cases have presented as conjunctivitis with a limited number reporting symptoms of influenza-like illness. However, a Dutch veterinarian who had visited an affected farm died on April 17 of bilateral pneumonia. Following the postmortem examination, the Dutch authorities have arrived at the conclusion that his death was linked directly to avian influenza virus. It appears that the veterinarian did not take the antiviral drugs.

The outbreak in the Netherlands is continuing, and to date over 18 million birds have been slaughtered there. This outbreak has now spread across the border to Belgium (see above “In Belgium”). Source: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org)