In Belgium

Surveillance for avian influenza in humans

After several outbreaks of avian influenza have been detected in poultry farms in the provinces of Limburg and Antwerpen (see previous issue), the surveillance of possible human cases is being introduced in these two provinces. In a first phase, a letter has been sent to all general practitioners (GPs) on April 21 by the Federal Public Service of Public Health, requesting to notify any suspect case to the respective Community services of their province and to send relevant samples (throat, nose or eye swabs) to the KUL virology laboratory in Leuven. Suspect cases must be considered when conjunctivitis or flu-like syndromes are observed in persons who have been in contact with infected animals. Up to May 6, only one case of conjunctivitis due to avian influenza has been reported in Belgium, and concerned a truck driver who transferred culled infected chickens. Laboratory investigation of conjunctival swab was positive for influenza A H7N7.

In order to better monitor the epidemiological characteristics of the disease and the compliance to antiviral treatment, information on each suspect case will be collected through a questionnaire to be completed by the GPs. The eventual transmission from human to human will also be assessed through a questionnaire addressed to the contacts of cases. These questionnaires will be presented to the GPs of the affected provinces on May 7 and 8 by the Scientific Institute of Public Health. Monitoring of serological titers of suspect cases will also be conducted.

On the animal side, no new cases have been detected among poultry since April 30, and 8 foci had been detected before that date in the provinces of Limburg and Antwerpen.

The call center, where experts from the AFSCA/FAVV and medical experts can answer to the questions from the public (0800/13 550), is still functional. Sources: IPH, AFSCA/FAVV (http://www.afsca.be/indexfr.htm), Federal Public Service of Public Health (http://www.health.fgov.be/).

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in Belgium: update

Up to May 6, no suspect nor probable cases have been reported in Belgium. The Federal Public Service (FPS) of Public Health has lifted its travel advice for Toronto (Canada) and Hanoi (Vietnam) from the list of areas to which it is recommended to avoid non-essential travels. Negative travel advice remains for China and Singapore. Sources: IPH and FPS Public Health (http://www.health.fgov.be/)
Elsewhere in Europe

Avian influenza in the Netherlands

On May 3, 12 holdings were considered as seriously suspected of being infected with avian influenza H7N7 in the Netherlands, 5 of which consist of pet avians. 249 "definitely infected" holdings have been recorded since the start of the epizootic, including 20 holdings of pet avians. On May 3, the General Inspection Service from the Ministry of Agriculture has begun a search of "forbidden" pet avians in the Gelders valley. Agents have visited addresses suspected of keeping unregistered pet avians. The owners of pet avians were obliged to report their birds to the ministry of agriculture for registration. All pet animals within the infected area are to be culled. So far, 23.6 million of avian influenza-susceptible animals have been killed in the Netherlands.

Besides the 82 cases with confirmed avian influenza (H7N7) infection reported in the previous issue, no further information on human cases is available. Source: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org)

In the Rest of the World

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) worldwide: update

Up to May 7, 6903 probable cases of SARS have been reported worldwide including 495 deaths (case fatality rate 7.2%). The majority of cases have been reported in China (66%), Hong Kong (24%) and Singapore (3%). The affected areas, i.e. the areas with recent local transmission, are Toronto (Canada), Beijing, Guangdong province, Hong Kong SAR, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, Tianjin and Taiwan (China), Ulaanbaatar (Mongolia), Philippines and Singapore. WHO has removed the United States and London (UK) from the list of areas with local transmission.

China is trying to control the outbreak and nine 9 hospitals in the capital currently deal exclusively with SARS cases. Just outside Beijing a 1000 bed complex has been built to accommodate incoming patients. In Beijing, 20% of the cases have occurred among health care workers. On May 3, 13688 people were in quarantine in Beijing.

The SARS case definition has been updated on May 1. It remains based on solely clinical and epidemiological information since there is no validated, widely and consistently available test up to date.

WHO recommends that persons traveling to Hong Kong; Beijing, Guangdong and Shanxi provinces of China consider postponing all but essential travels. This recommendation does not apply to passengers simply transiting through international airports.

Sources: Promed (http://www.promedmail.org) and WHO (http://www.who.int)