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HEALTH

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Doctors May Have Found Cause of Pneumonia Strain

French Doctor in Vietnam
Becomes Latest Fatality

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HONG KONG -- A French doctor in Vietnam died Wednesday in the latest in a rash of deaths blamed on a mysterious world-wide pneumonia outbreak, while researchers in Germany and Hong Kong appeared closer to pinpointing the cause.

The World Health Organization has listed nine deaths from severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). But Wednesday's victim in Vietnam and a Chinese professor who died earlier this month in Hong Kong could bring that toll up to 11.

The French doctor died at the Hanoi French Hospital, and had treated an American businessman who was diagnosed with the illness and later died after being evacuated to Hong Kong, hospital general director Yves Nicolai said.

Meanwhile, doctors in Hong Kong and Germany have isolated an agent apparently belonging to a class of viruses associated with measles and diseases in domesticated animals.

Examining specimens from a patient in Frankfurt Germany who was diagnosed with SARS, researchers in Frankfurt and Marburg isolated particles strikingly similar to paramyxovirus.

"It could possibly, potentially be the agent responsible for [severe acute respiratory syndrome], but we don't know at this stage," The Associate Press quoted Dr. Wolfgang Preiser, a consultant virologist at Frankfurt University Hospital, as saying. "The size fits a paramyxovirus. The structure, as far as we can make out, fits."

Doctors at Hong Kong's Chinese University and Prince of Wales Hospital said they have identified paramyxovirus in Hong Kong patients suffering from SARS.

Paramyxovirus is a family of viruses that cause a wide range of illnesses in people, include measles, mumps and para-influenza, a common cause of respiratory illness. It wasn't immediately clear if the particles discovered in Hong Kong and Frankfurt were related, or whether they represented a new type of paramyxovirus.

OUTBREAK

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A newly emergent type called Nipah was determined to be the cause of 105 deaths in Malaysia in 1998 and 1999 among pig farmers. Those cases were believed to have been transmitted by pigs to humans, rather than by humans-to-humans, which is the way the current outbreaks of SARS have spread.

Some symptoms in Nipah and SARS are different, with Nipah causing swelling of the brain and coma, while SARS has caused atypical pneumonia.

Outbreak on Four Continents

Government officials in Hong Kong and Vietnam reported dozens of new cases of a severe respiratory illness that appears to have spread to four continents, as Hong Kong health officials announced some progress treating its symptoms.

Vietnam reported several additional confirmed or suspected cases Tuesday, bringing the total there to 63, including a nurse who died during the weekend in Hanoi. Also suspected of contracting the disease, whose causes aren't yet understood, was a World Health Organization doctor who had been working at Hanoi French Hospital, the epicenter of that country's outbreak. The doctor fell ill during a flight to Thailand and is in stable condition at a Bangkok hospital.

Hong Kong announced 28 new cases Tuesday for a total of 123. All but 12 of the patients have developed pneumonia. Authorities in Australia are examining 20 people with flu-like symptoms for other signs of the illness, which is being called SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome by the WHO. The cases, along with a handful of others in North America and Europe, pushed to well over 200 the WHO estimate on Monday of 167 confirmed cases. Those figures exclude more than 300 cases and five reported deaths from what may have been a related outbreak that began in southern China four months ago, but that Beijing says already has begun to recede.

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Hong Kong also announced some success treating the syndrome, though it played down expectations of a cure, particularly when the pathogen causing the syndrome still is unknown and suspected to be viral. Biopsies of lung tissue in some of the more severe cases of pneumonia

showed that much of the damage was apparently wrought not by the pathogens themselves, but by the body's immune response to them. In those cases, doctors have applied steroids and other drugs to reduce swelling, in addition to using antiviral drugs aimed at stopping the pathogen from multiplying in the body.

'Good Results'

"At the moment we are seeing good results," said K.Y. Yuen, a doctor at the University of Hong Kong. At the city's Kwong Wah Hospital, he said, "there are three patients who are now recovering and one of the nurses is going to be discharged, so you can see that there are drugs that we can try on these patients that are yielding good results at the moment." Dr. Yuen cautioned, however, "We don't know what will happen in the long run because we have so many patients, but we are doing our best."

In addition to fighting the disease, Hong Kong simultaneously is waging a public-relations battle to soothe public concerns and protect the city's tourism industry. The outbreak of the illness, as well as war clouds gathering over Iraq, has caused many people to cancel travel plans in the region.

Anxious Hong Kong parents flooded school switchboards with queries about the disease, and some took their children out of school. The Education and Manpower Bureau sent a letter to all schools conveying health-department information on hygiene, and some principals are advising teachers to open classroom windows to improve ventilation. Feeding concern are charges by some health-care professionals and editorial writers that the government withheld information about the extent of the outbreak.

Before Monday, health authorities would provide figures for only confirmed cases in health-care workers, obscuring what was later revealed to be an equal number of people whose cases weren't being tabulated publicly. The government is providing more complete figures, but has defended its decision not to publicize all the cases it is observing because many likely will turn out to be routine cases of flu and pneumonia.

"We're not trying to hide anything," said Dominic Tsang, a senior hospital authority official, told reporters. "Is it possible there are cases that have escaped our attention? Well, yes," but there is still no evidence of an outbreak of the disease in the overall community, Dr. Tsang said. Most cases in Hong Kong and Vietnam are in health-care workers or in relatives and friends who have been in close contact with them.

Greater Scrutiny

The debate in Hong Kong, which has the highest number of confirmed cases outside of China's southern Guangdong province, highlights a paradox: Because the city has a relatively sophisticated surveillance network for infectious diseases, as well as a free press, it also invites greater scrutiny than other locations coping with the disease. China, for example, suppressed media coverage of the outbreak in Guangdong.

Apparently responding to complaints by many governments that World Health Organization alerts about disease were unduly frightening away tourists and other travelers, the WHO said in its latest public release on SARS that "there is no current justification for any restriction in travel or trade."

Still, tracking new cases in Hong Kong has proved a great challenge, highlighting the risk there may be many undetected cases in the community at large. For example, it took nearly two weeks to identify the "index case," or first case, who set off the largest cluster of cases in Hong Kong, at the Prince of Wales Hospital. The seriousness of the patient's illness had been overlooked by attending doctors because he exhibited routine flu symptoms, but not pneumonia.

Leung Ping-chung, who has been working throughout the SARS outbreak at Hong Kong's hardest-hit hospital, told the Associated Press the patient was a man in his 40s who had visited Hainan island and other parts of southern China. Dr. Leung said the man was "still very sick," and he criticized the government for playing down the threat posed by the disease.

There is no indication so far that casual contact can result in infection. David Heymann, the WHO's communicable-diseases chief, said the illness doesn't seem to spread as quickly a flu. "It isn't contagious at the level of many other infectious diseases," he said. "A normal influenza would be very contagious to people sitting in the same room."

-- Margot Cohen in Hanoi and Geet Frank in Hong Kong contributed to this article.

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