

Two cases of novel coronavirus are confirmed in France

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French health authorities have confirmed that a second patient has been infected with a novel coronavirus, as the World Health Organization confirmed that it was increasingly likely that the virus could be spread from human to human.

The French Ministry of Social Affairs and Health informed WHO at the weekend that a second person had been identified as having the virus, after laboratory confirmation of the first case on 7 May. The two patients shared a hospital room between 27 and 29 April.

Three epidemiological investigations are currently under way in France. The first concerns the 124 people who had contact in France with the first patient infected with the virus. Laboratory tests were carried out on five people, four of whom tested negative.

Another investigation is focusing on the 39 people who travelled to the United Arab Emirates with the first patient. And the final investigation is looking at the 38 people in contact with the second patient, who is in an isolation ward in a hospital in Lille. Since September 2012 a total of 34 laboratory confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus have been reported around the world, 18 of which have resulted in death. Most cases have been in the Middle East, with 25 in Saudi Arabia, two in Jordan, two in Qatar, and one in the United Arab Emirates. There have also been two cases in the UK, one resulting in death.¹ Most patients are men (23 of the 29 cases in which sex was reported) and range in age from 24 to 94 years (median 56 years).

Keiji Fukuda, WHO's assistant director general for health security and the environment, is currently in Saudi Arabia investigating an outbreak at a health clinic where 15 people were infected, of whom seven died. He told a press conference in Saudi Arabia that there were many gaps in experts' knowledge of the virus.

He added, "Of most concern, however, is the fact that the different clusters seen in multiple countries increasingly support

the hypothesis that when there is close contact this novel coronavirus can transmit from person to person. This pattern of person to person transmission has remained limited to some small clusters, and so far there is no evidence that this has the capacity to sustain generalised transmission in communities."

Fukuda emphasised that the new virus was not the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus (SARS), which in 2002 and 2003 infected around 8000 people and killed around 770 people globally.

He said, "[The viruses] are distinct from each other. However, the fact that they are related has added to the world's concern . . . We know that when people get infected many of them develop severe pneumonia. What we don't know is how often people might develop mild disease. We also know that most of the persons who have been infected so far have been older men, often with other medical conditions. We are not sure why we are seeing this pattern and if it will change over time."

Siouxie Wiles, a microbiologist at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, said that the virus was currently not showing signs that it would become a pandemic.

But she added, "We shouldn't be complacent. It is certainly not inconceivable that nCoV [the novel coronavirus] could mutate in some way to become more infectious to healthy people, the first step towards a SARS-like scenario. And there is still so much we don't know about nCoV. Where did it come from? What is nCoV's natural reservoir?"

bmj.com Editorial: Novel coronavirus: how much of a threat? (BMJ 2013;346:f1301, doi:10.1136/bmj.f1301)

¹ Wise J. Patient dies from novel coronavirus in UK. *BMJ* 2013;346:f1133.

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