NEWS

US health officials press Congress for \$1.9bn to combat Zika

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US health officials said yesterday that their agencies do not have enough money to respond to the threat to public health posed by the Zika virus and called on Congress to appropriate the \$1.9bn (£1.3bn; €1.7bn) in emergency funding that President Barack Obama requested.

The president sought the funding in February,¹ but Republicans in Congress, who control the House of Representatives and the Senate, declined to appropriate the funds, saying that the administration should instead draw on unspent funds that had been appropriated to combat the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in west Africa. The administration argued that those funds were still needed for ongoing anti-Ebola programs, but after Congress refused to act administration officials transferred \$510m slated for Ebola related projects to fund efforts to combat Zika, as well as \$79m from other disease control and research projects.

Speaking at a White House press briefing, Anthony S Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said that these stopgap measures were not enough. Unless Congress provided the requested funding, Fauci warned, efforts to develop effective diagnostic tests, drugs, and vaccines could stall. He said, "The money being transferred over from the Ebola account will help bring us a bit further, but it's still not what we want. When the president asked for \$1.9bn, we needed \$1.9bn."

Of particular concern, Fauci said, was the effect that uncertain funding would have on his agency's partnerships with drug companies, which will be needed for drug and vaccine development. "If they don't perceive us as a reliable partner,

they tend to back off a bit, and that would be the worst thing because we won't be able to develop these countermeasures completely on our own," he said.

Anne Schuchat, deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said that investigators were learning more and more about the virus every day and that "what we're learning is not reassuring." Schuchat noted that the virus seemed to pose a threat throughout pregnancy, not just during the first trimester, and caused a broader set of complications beyond microcephaly, including blindness. "Everything we look at with this virus seems to be scarier than we thought," she said. State and local health authorities needed funding to prepare now, she said. "While we absolutely hope we don't see widespread local transmission in the continental US, we need states to be ready," she said.

As at 6 April 346 travel associated Zika virus cases in the US had been reported to the CDC, of which 32 were in pregnant women, but there had been no reported cases of locally acquired mosquito-borne infection. On the US territory of Puerto Rico, however, 354 cases of infection had been reported to the CDC, almost all locally acquired. "We are quite concerned about Puerto Rico," Schuchat said. "We think there could be hundreds of thousands of cases of Zika virus cases in Puerto Rico and hundreds of affected babies."

¹ McCarthy M. US health officials press Congress for Zika funds. *BMJ* 2016;352:i1545.

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