

Drug-resistant tuberculosis on the increase in the UK

May 2 2008

A changing population structure and ongoing migration have increased cases of drug resistant tuberculosis, according to a study published onbmj.com today.

The incidence of tuberculosis in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been on the increase with more than 8000 cases reported in 2006. In addition, resistance to antituberculosis drugs has been increasing globally.

Of mounting concern is the increasing transmission of drug resistant tuberculosis among difficult to treat, marginalised groups in urban areas such as London, and the problems this could create for tuberculosis control.

Dr Michelle Kruijsaar and colleagues present the latest trends in resistance to antituberculosis drugs between 1998 and 2005 using data from the National Surveillance System, involving 28 620 confirmed cases of tuberculosis.

Overall, the researchers found that the proportion of cases resistant to any first line drug had increased from 5.6% to 7.9%. They report an increasing proportion of isoniazid resistance (6.9%) and small increases in rifampicin resistance (1.2%) and multidrug resistance (0.9%).

Importantly, outside London there was a significant increase in resistance to isoniazid. The authors suggest this reflects the increasing

number of patients with tuberculosis who are not born in the UK. Analyses showed an increase in the number of cases in people from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian subcontinent that could be related.

In London, the rise in isoniazid resistance has been linked to an ongoing outbreak from 1999 that has involved over 300 cases to date. This outbreak has been associated with imprisonment and drug misuse and includes mainly the UK born population. The authors reinforce the importance of recognising symptoms early in this group.

They also note that the proportion of multidrug resistance showed a small increase (from 0.8% to 0.9%)—with the levels seen in the UK similar to those in other Western European countries—and suggest that most multidrug resistance cases occur due to problems with patient management rather than as a result of transmission within the UK.

These findings highlight the importance of early case detection by clinicians, rapid testing of susceptibility to drugs, additional support services to ensure that patients complete treatment, as well as continuous surveillance, and more help with tuberculosis control in countries with high incidence, conclude the authors.

The rising incidence of tuberculosis in the UK, combined with the rising proportion of resistant cases, increases the potential for onward transmission, warn the authors of an accompanying editorial.

James Lewis and Violet Chihota call for a range of strategies to be implemented including strengthening tuberculosis control and improving research into new diagnostics and drugs for multidrug resistant strains.

“Drug resistant tuberculosis in the UK cannot be controlled solely with local strategies —a global perspective is needed”, they conclude.

Source: British Medical Journal

Citation: Drug-resistant tuberculosis on the increase in the UK (2008, May 2) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-05-drug-resistant-tuberculosis-uk.html>

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