

Researcher may have contracted virus carried by monkeys

October 28 2010, By Hudson Sangree

It's the stuff of doomsday movies: A new virus jumps from animals to people, with ominous possibilities. At the California National Primate Research Center at the University of California, Davis, last year, a newly identified form of virus devastated a monkey colony and sickened a researcher, who likely carried it outside the facility, officials said.

The incident -- revealed Friday at a meeting of infectious disease specialists in Canada -- apparently went no further. The researcher recovered, and investigators did not find any others who were infected, said Nicholas Lerche, the Davis primate center's chief veterinarian and associate director.

Could it have been worse?

"Don't panic, but be concerned," said Greg Gray, an expert on the spread of [infectious diseases](#) from animals to humans at the University of Florida.

Here's what happened:

Starting in May 2009, about two dozen titi [monkeys](#), small primates from South America, were attacked by an infection that killed 19 of them despite intensive veterinary care, Lerche said.

A researcher who worked with the monkeys developed symptoms that included a fever, [dry cough](#) and chest pain. The person was sick for

several weeks but never sought medical attention, he said.

Later the researcher tested positive for antibodies that indicated the person had contracted the same virus as the monkeys, Lerche said. No one else at the center or at the researcher's home had the virus, he said.

Scientists at the University of California, San Francisco, examined the virus and determined it was a previously unidentified type of [adenovirus](#).

Adenoviruses cause a variety of diseases, including respiratory infections, gastroenteritis, pinkeye, hepatitis and pneumonia.

"To our knowledge, this is the first example of a cross-species transmission event from adenovirus infection," wrote UCSF scientist Charles Chiu in a report he gave Friday to the Infectious Diseases Society of America at the group's annual meeting, in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Studies are continuing to determine whether the monkeys infected the researcher or the researcher infected the monkeys, Chiu wrote.

UC Davis officials said Wednesday they were unaware of the incident until they read about it in news accounts. Jenifer Goodwin, a reporter for syndicated news source HealthDay, broke the story Friday.

Experts differed on how much the incident should worry the public.

"Humans and nonhuman primates are closely related. They do share or have the potential to share a number of pathogens," Lerche said.

In the mid-1980s, humans transmitted measles to monkeys at the Davis primate facility, causing an outbreak, he said.

"There's compelling evidence that the origin of the virus that causes AIDS originated in species of nonhuman primates," Lerche said.

Safety precautions at the primate center are much higher when doing infectious disease research, he said. The titi monkeys are used mainly for behavioral studies.

Christian Sandrock, a UC Davis expert in emerging infectious diseases and the acting Yolo County health officer, said he could understand how a researcher working closely with monkeys could contract a primate form of adenovirus.

But Sandrock said the virus would be poorly adapted to humans, making it "very, very unlikely" that it would be passed from person to person.

"It's an extremely rare possibility," he said.

Still, he said, there are "a lot of viruses that can jump" from other primates to humans. The Ebola [virus](#) and others that cause hemorrhagic fevers are thought to come from non human primates, he said.

Humans and monkeys each have herpes viruses that can kill the other species, he said.

People should be more concerned about the current outbreak of whooping cough, Sandrock said.

Gray, who heads the University of Florida's Department of Environmental and Global Health, said he examines workers who deal with turkeys, dogs and other animals to determine what viruses are passed to humans.

"There's evidence that more than 70 percent of emerging pathogens in

recent years have come from animals. There's other evidence that common diseases came from animals."

"It's important" he said, "to consider the human-animal nexus."

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