

French victim of SARS-like virus dies (Update)

May 28 2013, by Nicolas Gubert

France's first victim of a SARS-like virus, which the 65-year-old man is thought to have contracted in Dubai, has died, health officials said Tuesday.

"The first patient is dead," said a spokesman with the Directorate General for Health, referring to the man who was hospitalised on April 23 following digestion problems after his return from Dubai.

The virus had claimed two lives in Europe already: one in Britain and the other in Germany.

The new virus has killed 24 people around the world so far, mainly in Saudi Arabia.

Another man in France, who shared a hospital room with him for three days, was later found to have the nCoV-EMC virus, a cousin of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) that sparked a health scare around the world in 2003.

The other man, who is in his 50s, has been in hospital in the northern city of Lille since May 9.

Hospital authorities said in a statement that both men had been placed in isolated rooms and that "all human and material means had been deployed to treat" the dead man.

The second man "was in a serious but stable condition," it said.

Both patients were given cardiac and respiratory support oxygen, which is administered to patients whose hearts and lungs are so severely diseased or damaged that they cease working, the statement added.

French Health Minister Marisol Touraine expressed sadness over the death, adding: "Authorities remain on alert but ... there is no new situation in our country regarding the epidemic."

Like SARS, the virus appears to cause an infection deep in the lungs, with patients suffering from a temperature, cough and breathing difficulties, but it differs from SARS in that it also causes rapid kidney failure.

The virus, which until now has been known as the novel coronavirus, or nCoV-EMC, was redubbed the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus, or MERS. There have been 44 confirmed cases, according to the World Health Organisation.

Saudi Arabia has had by far the most cases, with 30 confirmed infections and 18 fatalities, while cases have also been detected in Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, Britain and France.

Scientists at the Erasmus medical centre in Rotterdam have pointed to bats as a natural source for the virus.

Bats were also pinpointed as a likely natural reservoir for SARS in a 2005 study, and are known carriers of the deadly haemorrhagic fever Ebola.

The WHO said Friday that much uncertainty remained surrounding

MERS, stressing that it aimed to work closely with Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and perhaps other Middle Eastern countries to determine how great the risk is.

Professor Ian Jones, a virologist from the University of Reading, sought to play down fears of infection.

"Apart from the unusual circumstances of very close containment with already hospitalised persons, it does not seem to transfer among people," he said.

"As a result, the overall risk remains very low and the most pressing need is to identify where the virus is coming from so that these occasional infections can be prevented."

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