

WHO: Scientific red tape mars efforts vs. virus

May 23 2013, by John Heilprin



China's Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization, WHO, leaves the podium after delivering a speech during the 66th World Health Assembly at the European headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, Monday, May 20, 2013. (AP Photo/Keystone, Jean-Christophe Bott)

International efforts to combat a new pneumonia-like virus that has now killed 22 people are being slowed by unclear rules and competition for

the potentially profitable rights to disease samples, the head of the World Health Organization warned Thursday.

Dr. Margaret Chan, in a blunt warning to the U.N. agency's annual global assembly, portrayed a previously little-known flap over who owns a sample of the virus as a global game-changer that could put people's lives at risk. The virus, which first emerged in Saudi Arabia where most cases have arisen, is called MERS for Middle East respiratory syndrome.

"Please, I'm very strong on this point, and I want you to excuse me," she said. "Tell your scientists in your country, because you're the boss. You're the national authority. Why would your scientists send specimens out to other laboratories on a bilateral manner and allow other people to take intellectual property rights on a new disease?"

The controversy stems from a sample taken by Saudi microbiologist Ali Mohamed Zaki that he mailed last year to virologist Ron Fouchier at the Erasmus Medical Center in the Netherlands.

Fouchier tested, sequenced and identified it last September as a new virus. Then his private medical center patented how it synthesized the germ and required other researchers who wanted samples to first sign an agreement that could trigger a payment.

Saudi Arabia, which had the first case, said the patenting delayed its development of diagnostic kits and blood tests. "There was a lag of three months where we were not aware of the discovery of the virus," Deputy Health Minister Ziad Memish told the Geneva assembly. He said the sample was sent to the Dutch lab without official permission.

So far there is no blood test for detecting infection in communities. Memish said that patients need to be isolated because in some cases, diarrhea or vomiting may help spread the germ.

Dr. Keiji Fukuda, WHO's assistant director-general for health security, said his agency also has been "struggling with diagnostics" because of property rights concerns and ill-defined international rules for sharing such materials.

Chan railed against any arrangement that could prevent rapid sharing of information or that would enable individual scientists or private labs to profit.

WHO officials say the delays involve blood and other tests though a few other facilities in Canada, Britain and Germany have samples.

Fouchier, however, said the agreements between individual countries are similar to those within WHO's networks.

"There are no restrictions to the use of the virus for research and public health purposes. There are only restrictions for commercial exploitation and forwarding virus to third parties," he wrote in an email, responding to questions from The Associated Press.

Any delays claimed by WHO are a misconception, he said.

"After the first identification of the virus, diagnostic tests were developed in collaboration with several public health laboratories, and these tests were distributed free of charge to everyone around the world who asked for them," Fouchier added. "We have not denied access to the virus to any research and public health laboratory with the appropriate facilities to handle this virus safely."

The World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of WHO, meets from May 20-28.

Indonesia has previously refused to share samples of the bird flu virus

that has been seen in Southeast Asia for several years. That country claimed vaccines made from those samples would be too expensive for developing countries to afford. That dispute led to a protracted series of negotiations with WHO and others to ensure poor nations would have access to vaccines in a global epidemic.

At the assembly, Fukuda said the new MERS virus has now claimed 22 lives out of 44 cases, mostly in Saudi Arabia.

The latest fatal case involves a 63-year-old man in central Saudi Arabia with an underlying health condition who died Monday, five days after being hospitalized. WHO officials say they do not believe it is related to a cluster of cases reported in the eastern part of the country.

Most of the confirmed cases involved men, and the patients' average age is 56, said WHO officials, citing information that comes in part from Saudi health authorities.

The outbreak began at a Saudi health care facility in April, WHO officials said.

Fukuda said evidence in some of the disease clusters points to limited spread between people. Last week, WHO said some cases suggest the virus may already be spreading in the community.

Many health officials have been frustrated at the lack of detail coming out of Saudi Arabia about the virus and its spread.

In a speech on Monday, Chan publicly praised China for its rapid sharing of information on the new bird flu, H7N9. She said nothing about Saudi Arabia and reminded countries of the importance of "fully transparent reporting to WHO."

Fukuda said officials do "not know the full geographic spread" of MERS. He said the incubation period seems to be anywhere from 2 ½ to 14 days.

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