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Saudi hospital head sacked as MERS death toll hits 117 (Update)

May 7 2014, by Assad Abboud

Saudi Arabia's acting health minister has announced the sacking of the head of a Jeddah hospital where a spike in MERS infections among medical staff sparked panic among the public.

And as two more deaths were announced from the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus, which some researchers think may originate in camels, Adel Fakieh also announced an awareness campaign to help stop the disease's spread.

The campaign urges people not only to follow strict measures of hygiene, but specifically to avoid sick camels and refrain from eating raw camel meat or drinking unboiled camel milk.

Fakieh had already made such a recommendation last week.

In contrast, the campaign says cooked meat and boiled milk from camels are harmless.

Fakieh said on Twitter late Tuesday that he had sacked the head of King Fahd Hospital, the largest in the Red Sea city of Jeddah, after inspecting the emergency room there.

The Jeddah hospital was temporarily shut last month after several medics were infected by MERS.

And panic there prompted at least four doctors to resign in mid-April

after they refused to treat MERS patients for fear of infection.

Nearly a week later, Riyadh dismissed the health minister and appointed Fakieh, who is labour minister, to take over the health portfolio on an acting basis.

Fakieh, who has repeatedly promised "transparency" over MERS, said he has replaced the head of the hospital and his assistants.

"The new team will immediately take up its duties," he tweeted, adding that "the ministry will take all decisive measures to achieve its goals in preserving the health of members of society."

On Wednesday, health officials announced two more deaths from MERS, bringing the toll to 117.

The victims were a 68-year-old woman in Jeddah, the kingdom's commercial capital, and a 60-year-old man died in Medina.

Saudi Arabia has reported 431 infections since MERS first appeared in its eastern region in September 2012 before spreading across the kingdom.

Fakieh said last week that measures to contain the spread of MERS would be announced in the coming days" as Western experts and representatives of the World Health Organisation met in Riyadh.

Control, prevention measures 'breached'

The WHO said Wednesday a team of its experts had completed a five-day mission to the kingdom to assist in assessing the recent increase in the number of people infected in Jeddah.

It said the experts had visited two main hospitals and found that the increase in cases are "due to breaches in WHO's recommended infection prevention and control measures."

At the same time, it said the recent increase in numbers of infections does not suggest a "significant change in the transmissibility of the virus."

Nor is there any evidence "of sustained human-to-human transmission in the community and the transmission pattern overall remained unchanged."

"The majority of human-to-human infections occurred in health care facilities," it said, adding that "one quarter of all cases have been health care workers."

The team called for improving "knowledge and attitudes" of health care workers about MERS.

MERS is considered a deadlier but less-transmissible cousin of the SARS virus that erupted in Asia in 2003 and infected 8,273 people, nine percent of whom died.

There are no vaccines or antiviral treatments for MERS, a disease with a mortality rate of more than 40 percent that experts are still struggling to understand.

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