

More reason for calm than panic in South Korea's MERS scare

June 4 2015, by Foster Klug



Workers wearing protective gears spray anti-septic solution in an airplane amid rising public concerns over the spread of MERS virus at Incheon International Airport in Incheon, South Korea Thursday, June 4, 2015. Sales of surgical masks surge amid fears of a deadly, poorly understood virus. Airlines announce "intensified sanitizing operations." The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS, which stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade - SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. (Park Ji-ho/Yonhap via AP) KOREA OUT

Sales of surgical masks surge amid fears of a deadly, poorly understood virus. Airlines announce "intensified sanitizing operations." More than 1,100 schools close and 1,600 people—and 17 camels in zoos—are quarantined.

The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS, or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade—SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu.

Then, as now, confusion ruled as the media harped on the growing public panic, and health care workers and government officials struggled to understand and contain the diseases, sometimes downplaying the danger, sometimes inadvertently hyping it.

While it's still early and MERS is a scary disease with no vaccine and a high death rate, there are so far more reasons for calm caution than for panic.

Here's a look at what's happening in South Korea.

MERS CASES ARE GROWING ...

South Korea has seen 36 cases and three deaths, the largest outbreak in the world outside of Saudi Arabia, where most of the more than 1,100 cases have been and where the disease was first seen in 2012.

The cases are linked to a 68-year-old man who traveled to the Middle East, the World Health Organization said this week. When he returned and became sick last month, he visited two hospitals and two outpatient facilities, "creating multiple opportunities for exposure among health care workers and other patients," WHO said. The man wasn't isolated

because it wasn't thought at first that he had been exposed to MERS, which is from the same virus family as the common cold and SARS.

"Further cases can be expected," the U.N. health agency said.

MERS' mortality rate is an estimated 30 to 40 percent, according to Nicolas Locker, a virology expert at the University of Surrey.

The symptoms are fever, cough and shortness of breath, with an average incubation period of 5 to 6 days. Transmission comes through close contact with people—from living with or caring for someone, for instance—but camels are also thought to spread the virus.



A couple wears masks as a precaution against the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) virus as they walk on the Myeongdong, one of the main shopping districts, in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, June 4, 2015. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade—SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. Then,

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Viruses like MERS "remind us all that the globe is indeed a small place when it comes to the rapidity with which infected people can move over large geographic distances, bringing viruses they may be incubating with them," Christopher Olsen, a virus expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, said in an email.

... BUT IT ISN'T SWEEPING THE COMMUNITY

Despite media warnings about the virus "spreading" in South Korea, 30 of the 36 cases are linked to a single hospital, as is a Korean man diagnosed in China. There's no evidence yet in South Korea "of sustained transmission in the community," the WHO reports.

The three people who died—a 58-year-old woman, a 71-year-old man and an 82-year-old man—had previous respiratory problems, according to the Health Ministry.

South Korea also has an efficient emergency response system, Locker said, and has learned much from previous disease scares, especially the SARS pandemic in 2003.

South Korea has airport containment centers for respiratory screenings, and 16 hospitals equipped with bio-containment units for patients and staff, including 600 beds in negative pressure units for isolation and

treatment, Locker said.

Washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, not touching your face with unclean hands—this all helps prevent MERS, experts say.

Because it isn't airborne and only transmitted through close contact, it's highly unlikely anyone will get the disease in crowded areas, like parks or schools, said Kang Cheol-In, an infectious diseases expert at the Seoul-based Samsung Medical Center.

The closing of hundreds of schools "really doesn't make sense," Kang said.



Tourists wear masks as a precaution against MERS virus as they visit Gyeongbok Palace, one of South Korea's well-known landmarks, in Seoul Thursday, June 4, 2015. Sales of surgical masks surge amid fears of a deadly, poorly understood virus. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS, which stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit

Asia over the last decade - SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

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MEDIA AND PUBLIC FEARS MAY BE OVERBLOWN

Some experts believe the government should have done more initially to convince the public that many of their fears are unwarranted.

Many people here, however, are in no mood to trust their public officials. The MERS scare follows the sinking of a ferry that killed more than 300 people last year and was widely blamed in part on official incompetence.

Some experts support a strong quarantine to stop MERS' spread; others question its worth.



Chinese tourists wear masks as a precaution against the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) virus as they walk on the Myeongdong, one of the main shopping districts, in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, June 4, 2015. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade—SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. Then, as now, confusion ruled as the media harped on the growing public panic and health care workers and government officials struggled to understand and contain the diseases, sometimes downplaying the danger, sometimes inadvertently hyping it. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)

Kim Sung-han, a professor at the Seoul-based Asan Medical Center, said isolating anyone who has had contact with MERS patients, even if they don't show symptoms, is pointless because no studies show the MERS virus can be spread during the incubation period.

"It's like using a hammer to push in a thumbtack," Kim said.



South Korean police officers wear masks as a precaution against MERS virus in downtown Seoul, South Korea Thursday, June 4, 2015. Sales of surgical masks surge amid fears of a deadly, poorly understood virus. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS, which stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade - SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

The possibility of MERS spreading through South Korea is worrisome, of course, but Kim is skeptical that it will happen because the disease usually spreads slowly and requires close contact.

Kang, the infectious diseases expert, said the initial government response was inadequate, "but the people are also looking at things in an unreasonable manner."



South Korean tourist assistants, wearing red shirts, wear masks as a precaution against the MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) virus as they help foreign tourists on the Myeongdong, one of the main shopping districts, in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, June 4, 2015. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade—SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. Then, as now, confusion ruled as the media harped on the growing public panic and health care workers and government officials struggled to understand and contain the diseases, sometimes downplaying the danger, sometimes inadvertently hyping it. (AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon)



A member of a civic group holds a red card and a sign reading: "Make public the infection route" during a rally against the government's policy about the countermeasure of MERS virus in front of the government complex in Seoul, South Korea Thursday, June 4, 2015. Sales of surgical masks surge amid fears of a deadly, poorly understood virus. The current frenzy in South Korea over MERS, which stands for Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, brings to mind the other menacing diseases to hit Asia over the last decade - SARS, which killed hundreds, and bird flu. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

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