Medical Xpress

S. Korea reports three MERS deaths as new cases fall (Update)

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South Korea Tuesday reported three more deaths from the MERS outbreak but health authorities said they were cautiously optimistic the worst was over as the number of new cases was falling.

Doctors are using an experimental treatment involving the injection of blood plasma from recovered victims of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) into seriously ill patients, health officials said.

Four new non-fatal cases were also confirmed Tuesday, bringing to 154 the total number of cases including 19 deaths—the largest outbreak outside Saudi Arabia.

Of the 135 non-fatal cases, 17 have recovered and been released from hospital, the health ministry said.

Of the 118 MERS cases still being treated, 16 are listed in unstable condition.

The number of new cases has been gradually declining from 12 on Friday to four on Tuesday, sparking hope the outbreak might be showing signs of easing.

"What is noteworthy is the fact that the number of new cases has been falling over the past few days," a senior ministry official told reporters.

"More cases are expected to occur sporadically but we don't expect to

see new cases occur in groups," he said.

The plasma therapy is still under clinical testing but is now being used on two MERS patients at two different hospitals, Kwon Jun-Wook, a senior health ministry official, told reporters.

"Two patients are being injected with blood plasma donated by two other patients who have been cured completely," he said, adding they would have consented to the procedure.

The health ministry has approved the experimental therapy on the advice of doctors and experts, he said.

MERS is considered a deadlier cousin of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which appeared in 2003 and killed more than 800 around the world.

Plasma treatment was previously used for SARS patients and showed some positive results in seriously ill patients, Kwon said.

Most of those who have died had pre-existing health problems.

A 49-year-old man became the youngest to die from the respiratory illness but the ministry said he had been suffering from cirrhosis of the liver and diabetes.

Three of the four new fatal cases were traced to Samsung Medical Centre, one of the two epicentres of the outbreak.

Almost half of the confirmed cases have been traced to the hospital, one of the most prestigious in South Korea, forcing it to temporarily shut down services on Sunday.

St Mary's Hospital, which has been closed after being traced with the second largest group of patients, plans to reopen late this month as no more cases have been tracked down to the facility in Pyeongtaek city, 65 kilometres (40 miles) south of Seoul.

The health ministry has set up telephone hotlines for foreigners living in South Korea, urging them to report to authorities should they develop symptoms and promising compensation if they have to be placed under quarantine, even if they are illegal immigrants.

The Seoul city government on Tuesday launched a massive disinfection campaign, fumigating thousands of online game parlours and karaoke bars and distributing tens of thousands of hand disinfectant gels.

Seoul mayor Park Won-Soon has criticised the central government for mishandling the outbreak in the initial stages and ordered aggressive preventive measures.

President Park Geun-Hye's approval ratings have plunged by 10 percentage points to 34.6 percent over the past two weeks in the aftermath of the outbreak, according to a Realmeter poll.

Currently, more than 5,500 people are in quarantine while some 3,500 others have been released.

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