

Beat: Health

MERS worrying but not a public health emergency, experts say

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USPA News - The sharp rise in cases of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) has worried experts of the World Health Organization (WHO), but the lack of evidence for sustained human-to-human transmission means it is not enough to declare a public health emergency, officials said on Wednesday. The conclusions were announced on Wednesday after the World Health Organization convened an emergency meeting on Tuesday to discuss the recent increase in cases, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

Thirteen affected countries also participated in the meeting and provided information about cases in their countries and their response to them. "After a quite lengthy discussion in which they looked at all of the available facts, the different considerations and the different perspectives, what they reached was a consensus that the situation had increased in seriousness and their concern about this situation had also increased in terms of urgency," said WHO Assistant Director-General Dr. Keiji Fukuda. "However, when they looked at all the information, they felt that the situation still fell short of calling it a public health emergency of international concern." The emergency committee noted that there was still no evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission, even though the public health impact has increased in recent weeks. The committee also voiced its concern about weaknesses in infection prevention and control as well as gaps in critical information and the possibility of MERS being exported to vulnerable countries. The conclusions were released as the Netherlands confirmed its first case of the SARS-like virus in a patient who recently visited Saudi Arabia. The National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) said the patient had been hospitalized in The Hague and was in a stable condition. "He was infected during a visit to Saudi Arabia. ... The patient is being cared for in strict isolation. His condition is stable," the institute said in a statement. "All people who have had contact with the patient are in the process of being identified. Of these persons, their health is being monitored." The new coronavirus first emerged in the Middle East in 2012 and is now known to have infected more than 500 people in 17 countries, including 157 people who died from the illness. And while there is no evidence yet of continuous human-to-human transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said it appears likely that the virus is able to pass from person-to-person in the event of close contact, especially in health care facilities. Most of the people infected with MERS - which is believed to have originated in camels or bats - were either in Saudi Arabia or had recently visited Saudi Arabia, where the disease first originated in 2012. The kingdom has reported a sharp increase in cases in recent weeks, worrying international health authorities as there is no vaccine or specific treatment.

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.
3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168
Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA
(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile
info@unitedpressassociation.org
info@gna24.com
www.gna24.com