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New Coronavirus Causes SARS Symptoms in Monkeys

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Optional travel not advised by World Health Organization to Hong Kong and Guangdong, China, the origins of the SARS epidemic where the virus continues to infect and kill. Photograph © 2003 by AFP.

April 16, 2003 Rotterdam, Netherlands - World Health Organization (W.H.O.) scientists have infected monkeys with the same new coronavirus suspected of causing the severe acute respiratory syndrome known as SARS. The primates developed the same disease symptoms experienced by human SARS patients. This is the same coronavirus that Canadian and Centers for Disease Control geneticists were finally able to gene sequence this past weekend. This particular genetic structure has not been seen before in the coronavirus family, but was extracted from some SARS patients.

"So we can now say for certain that the new coronavirus is the cause of SARS," said Dr. Klaus Stohr, a W.H.O. virologist. Researchers agree that the first mutation that created this new coronavirus occurred in animals and then jumped species to humans with the ability to spread itself like the common cold through coughs, sneezes, close contact and contaminated surfaces.

When University of Hong Kong microbiologist, Malik Peiris, was asked if the new virus could be man-made, he answered, "No, that whole genome is essentially new. Nature has been the terrorist throwing up this virus." He and other researchers think the reason Hong Kong's Amoy Garden apartments has such an intense cluster of SARS patients (at least 217) is that the SARS coronavirus mutated into a more dangerous form for some unknown reason. That hypothesis has not been proved yet, but implies experts are worried about what forms this coronavirus can take.

So far, the mortality rate is still averaging 4%, but many young, healthy patients in their 30s and 40s have been hospitalized with severe breathing problems. Some of those younger patients who would ordinarily have been expected to survive have died in China. In fact, four of the deaths reported in Hong Kong on April 15 were people in their 30s or 40s who had no known chronic disease.

How Long and How Far Will SARS Spread?

David Heymann, M. D., Director of W.H.O.'s Communicable Diseases section, said today, "What's dangerous about this is we don't know its potential. For the present, everything hinges on what we find out in China, as far as our projections" are for how persistently contagious and global this new virus might be.

Dr. Eskild Petersen, an infectious disease specialist at the University of Arizona said, "This has the potential to be a very big global health problem, possibly a pandemic on the order of the 1918 Spanish flu."

Donald Low, M.D., Chief of Microbiology at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Toronto, Canada, told me he agrees. "I think we are already seeing evidence that it's becoming a pandemic because did you see reports today I haven't seen these verified but cases in Brazil, cases in Indonesia, possibly in Africa. You know, the amount of energy and time and resources that we're putting to control this outbreak in Toronto what would happen if this gets into Brazil and into Sao Paulo? My God! I think we start to meet the definition of a pandemic.

"I think we might find that SARS causes quite a massive immune response on the part of the human host that the virus is able to trick the sick human host and have it over react. ...Maybe the way this SARS disease hurts the host is almost like the host turning on itself (in an auto-immune way)."

The next major step will be to produce a test which can detect the presence of the SARS virus in a patient's blood so doctors and hospital emergency rooms can more quickly identify who needs to be quarantined and who does not.

SARS Cases as of April 16, 2003 Reported by CDC and W.H.O.

United States

Suspected SARS pneumonia cases in the United States have climbed to 193 in 34 states; no deaths.

Alabama	1
California	42
Colorado	6
Connecticut	4
Florida	11
Georgia	3
Hawaii	5
Illinois	11
Indiana	1
Kansas	1
Kentucky	1
Maine	2
Massachusetts	8
Michigan	3
Minnesota	6
Mississippi	1
Missouri	2
Nevada	1
New Hampshire	1
New Jersey	3
New Mexico	1
New York	22
North Carolina	6
Ohio	10
Oregon	1
Pennsylvania	5
Rhode Island	1
South Carolina	1
Texas	7
Utah	5
Vermont	2

Virginia 5
Washington 19
Wisconsin 1

Worldwide:

April 16, 2003 - Current World Total: 3,299 Cases and 159 Deaths

Brazil 2
Canada 103 cases, 13 deaths
China 1432 cases, 64 deaths
China, Hong Kong 1268 cases, 61 deaths
China, Taiwan, 27
France, 5
Germany 6
Indonesia 1
Italy 3
Japan 1
Kuwait 1
Malaysia 5 cases, 1 death
Philippines 1
Ireland 1
Romania 1
Singapore 162 cases, 13 deaths
South Africa 1
Spain 1
Sweden 1
Switzerland, 1
Thailand 8 cases, 2 deaths
United Kingdom 6
United States 199
Viet Nam 63 cases, 5 deaths

Websites:

<http://www.who.int/en/> (World Health Organization)

<http://www.cdc.gov/> (Centers for Disease Control)

<http://www.bcgsc.ca/bioinfo/SARS/> (BCGenome Sciences Centre)

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