World Health Organization
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

Weekly Epidemiological Monitor

Volume 3, Issue 17, Sunday 25 April 2010

Current major events

Suspected Chemical Poisoning in Afghanistan

In the last three days, the Disease Early warning System (DEWS) in Afghanistan has reported a total of 60 cases of suspected chemical poisoning in two separate girls schools in Kunduz Province. The first incidence involving 12 girls from Fatematuzahra Girls School was on 21 April 2010. On 24 April 45 girls and 3 teachers from Khadejatulkobra Girls School were taken ill in similar circumstance. In both cases, the patients reported smelling strange odors in their classrooms before becoming ill. The symptoms were similar and included dizziness, headache and nausea. All patients were given supportive treatment and recovered fully.

Editorial note

This week, the DEWS network in Afghanistan investigated two incidences of suspected chemical poisoning in two separate girls schools in Kunduz Province. On both occasions, the incidence involved one classroom and the victims reported smelling strange chemical odour prior to developing symptoms. DEWS' investigations have confirmed these cases but have not established the causes. The investigating teams collected blood samples that were sent to Central Public Health Laboratory (CPHL) for testing. Also this week, the DEWS team investigated an incidence of acute food poisoning following the consumption of wild mushrooms in Sholgarah District, Balkh Province. Eight people (five family members and 3 neighbors) were involved. One elderly man died in this latter incidence.

The two incidences; of chemical poisoning and food poisoning are not isolated. Last year, incidences of chemical poisoning were reported from several girls schools, and their causes were never established. And in 2008, food poisoning associated with consumption of wheat contaminated with charmac was reported from Herat Province. Charmac (weed seeds) contains alkaloid poison that causes veno-occlusive disease.

Map of Afghanistan showing Kunduz and Balkh province

Few facts about poisoning

- Significant public health problem
- More than 94% of fatal poisoning occurs in middle and dlow income countries
- In 2002 an estimated 350,000 persons died worldwide for unintentional poisoning;
- Poisoning occurs when people drink, eat, breathe, inject, or touch enough of a hazardous substances (poison) to cause illness or injury in vary small amounts.

These recurring chemical and food poisoning in Afghanistan raise a lot of public health concern. This is much so because, the events involve children and we do not know what toxins or poisons are involved in these incidences. This time the chemicals or toxins involved happened to cause mild disease, but we do not know what can happen in the future. Moreover, we do not know what are the long term effects of these chemical on these children. Children are particularly vulnerable to chemical and environmental hazards. Afghanistan does not have a laboratory that has the capacity to test for chemicals and poisons and there is no such referral laboratory in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

These incidences need thorough investigations in order to identify or establish the causes of these poisoning. Knowledge obtained from epidemiological studies will contribute to the immediate and long term management of such chemical incidents in Afghanistan. Epidemiological tools are now available that can be used to guide management of chemical incidences and support actions to minimize adverse effect on health.

Update on outbreaks

in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Avian Influenza A(H5N1) in Egypt.; **Dengue fever** in Sudan

Current public health events of international concern
[cumulative N° of cases (deaths), **CFR %**]

Avian influenza	
Egypt	[109 (34), **31.1%**]
Vietnam	[119 (59), **49.5 %**]
Global total	[495(292), **58.9%**]
Yellow Fever	
Cameroon	[3(3), **100%**]
CAR	[10 (0), **0%**]
Dengue fever	
Sudan	[1599 (12), **0.7%**]
Rift Valley Fever	
South Africa	[151 (11), **7.2%**]
Pandemic (H1N1) 2009	
AFRO	No of deaths: 168
AMRO	No of deaths: At least 8309
EMRO	No of deaths: 1019
EURO	No of deaths: At least 4783
SEARO	No of deaths: 1769
WPRO	No of deaths: 1805
GLOBAL Total	No of deaths: 17,853

CFR=Case-Fatality Rate