**Current major event**

**Mass Psychogenic Illness in Afghanistan**

On 23/5/2012 the DEWS officer of Takhar province in Afghanistan was alerted to a massive poisoning incidence in a girls’ school in Taluqan district. A DEWS team visited the school and the hospital where the cases were admitted. A total of 103 cases, all school girls from Bibi Hajerah High School were admitted with symptom of weakness, nausea, dizziness and syncope. Some reported smelling a stench odour. Clinical assessment by the attending physicians and similar past history ruled out an organic cause. The cases were considered as a mass psychogenic illness given treatment and discharged home.

**Editorial note**

This is the fourth year where episodes of suspected mass poisoning of school girls is reported from Afghanistan. Like in the previous years the events are triggered off with one girl developing symptoms of headache, weakness, dizziness, nausea and fainting. Often these outbreaks were believed to be the work of political elements in the country who oppose girls education. Reports of stench smells preceding the appearance of symptoms have given credit to the theory of mass poisoning (chemical/bioterrorism). However, investigations into the causes of these outbreaks have yielded no such evidence so far. In the last four years over 1634 cases from 22 schools have been treated for Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI) in Afghanistan. There are no related deaths reported.

These outbreaks tend to follow a seasonal pattern. According to the Afghan authorities, the events start around April/May and close to the examination period. Doctors treating these cases believe that this is a Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI), a form of Mass Hysteria. However, these coincidences should be interpreted with caution, in that genuine complaints may be missed out and the consequences may be catastrophic.

According to psychologists, mass psychogenic illness (MPI), also known as mass sociogenic illness is a rapid spread of signs and symptoms of illness affecting a close group. It originates from a nervous system disturbance involving excitation, loss or alteration of function. The physical complaints that are exhibited unconsciously and have no corresponding organic cause. MPI is distinct from other collective delusions that are also included under the term Mass Hysteria, in that MPI causes symptoms of disease without any organic cause. Females (girls in particular) are most affected. The diagnosis of mass hysteria is still contentious.

MPI is poorly understood and presents special difficulties to clinicians and researchers. Since this is a recurrent problem in Afghanistan, the MOPH needs to focus attention on MPI. Better preparedness and a systematic approach to data collection for making informed decision is needed. Psychological and sociological services including psycho-education of students, counseling of affected persons and training of school teachers should be provided.

**Update on outbreaks**

in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Episodes</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Current public health events of international concern**

[cumulative N of cases (deaths), CFR %]

**Avian influenza**

- China [42(28), 66.7%]
- Egypt [167 (60), 35.9%]
- Indonesia [189 (157), 83 %]
- Viet Nam [123(61), 49.5%]
- Cambodia [21(19), 90.4%]
- Bangladesh [6(0), 0%]
- Global total [604(357), 59.1%]

**Measles**

- Afghanistan [261 (0), 0%]
- Somalia [1046 (na), na%]
- Yemen [3800(124), 3.3%]

**Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI)**

- Afghanistan [1634(0), 0%]
- Chikungunya/Dengue
  - Yemen [112(2), 1.2%]
- Crimean Congo Hemorrhagic Fever
  - Pakistan [11(3), 27.3%]

CFR=Case-Fatality Rate.

# Suspected cases only.

MPI Mass Psychogenic illness