

A time for vigilance, not panic

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Cruise ships are regularly dogged by Norwalk virus (people call it norovirus now, to make it simpler to spell). The virus is adept at spreading in closed communities and crew are old hands at managing it. But Hantavirus is very different. It's frightening; and often it's deadly, explains Brian J Ford...

Hantavirus has always been considered a disease of deer and rodents. We contract the infection by inhaling particles of infected dust. One of the most typical situations where Hantavirus can appear is when someone is cleaning out an old shed, or a barn, where rats and mice have taken up residence while they were away. The initial symptoms are like those of 'flu: fever (over 38°C), chills, aching muscles and weakness. You'd imagine that aspirin and some Vitamin C might take care of it.

Most cases clear up without intervention. The danger is limited to about 5% of patients when shortness of breath supervenes. Pulse becomes irregular and blood pressure falls. Kidney failure is one risk; internal haemorrhage is another. Of those in this pulmonary stage, 40% are likely to die. It's a serious infection, and there is no vaccine, nor an antiviral that works.

It was first identified after the Korean War, and named after the Hantan River, but in 1996 the picture worsened. Patients in Argentina were thought to have contracted the disease, not from infective rodent droppings, but by direct human transmission. In 2018 a case in Chubut, Argentina which was triggered by an infection in one person, soon spread to about 35 others and one-third of them died. The new strain was dubbed Andes virus, and this is the strain that has been identified in the outbreak aboard the MV Hondius cruise ship. The ship had departed from Argentina.

We have never before seen Hantavirus on ships. And it has rarely spread person-to-person. Yet here we have a dozen people ill. One is in intensive care and three have died. The genome of the virus is still being examined but it now has the capacity to spread much further. I first warned of it in 2003, and wrote of its potential in several articles published since (the latest just last year).

Hantavirus remains rare. There have since been cases in Brazil, and a few in California. With luck and care, the authorities will have this latest outbreak under control. But we cannot be complacent. Once this disease was spread by animals; now it's spread by humans. Once it was confined to a limited area; now it has the capacity to spread further. We shouldn't be unduly worried – but we need to be watchful. I've been guest speaker to 90 passengers on a similar voyage to those same ports. Our hearts go out to those distressed individuals, ever watchful for symptoms and currently with nowhere to go.

Pic: Jose Parra

Brian J Ford is well known as a biologist, author, lecturer and broadcaster. He has frequently published papers on likely infections of the future