

DISEASE WATCH | IN THE NEWS

Farmers on alert

An outbreak of a new animal virus that has been ongoing in mainland Europe since August 2011 has now reached the United Kingdom. Schmallenberg virus infects livestock, causing fever, loss of condition and reduced milk yield in cattle. Infected sheep do not display clinical symptoms, but if cattle or sheep are infected during pregnancy, then abortions, premature births, stillbirths and severe congenital deformities in newborns are common. In a statement, Nigel Gibbens, the UK Chief Veterinary Officer, said that farmers should “expect to see more cases as the lambing season progresses”. Virologists at the German federal animal health laboratory, the Friedrich Loeffler Institute, have isolated the virus and obtained the full genome sequence. Schmallenberg virus is an orthobunyavirus that belongs to the Simbu serogroup and is most closely related to Shamonda virus. Like other Simbu serogroup viruses, Schmallenberg virus is believed to be spread by *Culicoides* midges. Zoonotic transmission is thought to be highly unlikely. Russia has placed restrictions on the import of small ruminants from affected countries. *The Guardian/Science/ProMED-mail*



Total resistance?

Disturbing reports of ‘totally’ drug-resistant tuberculosis (TDR-TB) in India came to light in early January 2012. At least 12 patients in a clinic in Mumbai were reported to be

infected with *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* that doctors claimed was resistant to all antibiotics tested (five first-line and six second-line drugs). TDR-TB has been reported twice before, in Iran and Italy. In a statement, the WHO questioned the use of the term TDR-TB, which is not yet officially recognized by the agency, and said that WHO officials would classify the cases as extensively drug-resistant TB (XDR-TB). XDR-TB — officially, infection with *M. tuberculosis* that is resistant to the first-line drugs isoniazid and rifampicin, as well as any fluoroquinolone and at least one of the three injectable drugs capreomycin, kanamycin and amikacin — was first reported in 2006 and is now present in almost 60 countries worldwide, with at least 25,000 cases reported annually. Although there is some disagreement as to the exact extent of resistance in these cases, they highlight the importance of effective case management and treatment compliance. *Nature News/ProMED-mail*

2020 goal for neglected tropical diseases

A new, wide-ranging public-private partnership (PPP) that aims to control or eradicate ten of the world’s most neglected tropical diseases by 2020 was announced in London, UK, at the end of January 2012. Involving a range of funding partners, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and 13 pharmaceutical companies, the PPP aims to strengthen and expand existing drug donation and distribution programmes and to accelerate the development of new drugs. A total of UK£785 million has been pledged. The targets for elimination include leprosy, guinea worm and human African trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness), and the diseases earmarked for effective control include Chagas disease and visceral leishmaniasis.

The news comes at a time when another PPP, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, is going through a major shakeup. Michel Kazatchkine announced in January 2012 that he will step down as Executive Director in March, following an earlier announcement from the Board that they intend to appoint a General Manager who will report directly to the Board. The Global Fund recently announced it would award no new

grants until 2014, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has stepped in with an additional donation of US\$750 million.

The Guardian/BBC

Malaria deaths much higher than estimates?

Global malaria mortality is much higher than was previously thought, according to a controversial systematic analysis of mortality data for the period 1980–2010, which has been published in the *Lancet*. Christopher Murray and colleagues at the University of Washington in Seattle, USA, and the University of Queensland, Australia, found that deaths from malaria had decreased by >30% since the global peak in 2004, but they also calculated that there were an estimated 1.24 million deaths from malaria worldwide in 2010, twice the official WHO estimate of 650,000. This new estimate includes 524,000 deaths in individuals aged 5 years or older, suggesting that the burden of malaria mortality in adults is much greater than was previously thought. *Lancet*

H5N1: still making news

The controversy over the H5N1 influenza papers continues to rumble on. Although at the time of going to press neither paper has been published, more details of the work have emerged in various commentaries. One of the authors involved, Yoshihiro Kawaoka of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA, and the University of Tokyo, Japan, broke his silence in a Comment article in *Nature*. He revealed that although his paper, which is in press at *Nature*, describes the creation of a virus that was transmissible between ferrets, the virus was not fatal. Kawaoka declared that he did not support the decision of the US federal advisory board to request that the papers be redacted, and stressed the importance of the work for understanding H5N1 transmissibility. A 60-day moratorium on research into highly pathogenic influenza viruses has been declared, and there are plans for an ‘Asilomar’-style summit to discuss the issues raised by this case. *Nature/Science/mBio*

In the News was compiled with the assistance of David Ojcius, University of California, Merced, USA. David’s links to infectious disease news stories can be accessed on his Twitter page (@Ojcius).