

## DISEASE WATCH | IN THE NEWS

**XMRV just a contaminant?**

Since the 2009 reports linking xenotrophic murine leukaemia virus-related virus (XMRV) with chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) and prostate cancer, much debate has ensued in the retroviral community. Although numerous studies have subsequently found no evidence for a link between XMRV and these diseases, others have supported the original observations. Now, four independent studies have identified potential sources of contamination that might have accounted for the original PCR-based identification of XMRV in patients with CFS or cancer. These potential sources of contamination include murine leukaemia virus-encoding nucleic acids in commercial PCR reagents, mouse genomic DNA in human blood and tissue samples, and DNA from a laboratory human tumour cell line that was previously infected with XMRV or a closely related Gammaretrovirus. These findings suggest that the link between XMRV and CFS or prostate cancer may be unfounded, although they do not rule out the involvement of an as-yet-unidentified virus in these diseases. *Retrovirology/EurekaAlert*

**Recount of food poisoning cases**

The incidence of illness and mortality as a result of food poisoning in the United States has been lowered, according to recent estimates from the CDC. The estimates suggest that 48 million people get sick and 3,000 people die annually as a result of food poisoning, figures that are substantially lower than the 76 million illnesses and 5,000 deaths that were previously thought to occur (based on a 1999 study). However, rather than representing an improvement in food safety procedures in the United States, the revised estimates result from changes in methodological approaches and data analysis. Even with the lower estimates, food poisoning is still expected to affect one in six Americans each year, despite many cases being completely preventable.

Although the lowering of these estimates does not correlate with a decrease in the actual incidence of cases, the recent passing of the Food Safety Modernization Act into US law should begin to reduce the number of food poisoning cases in real terms. *Emerg. Infect. Dis./NY Times*

**TB thrives in 'Victorian-like' London**

According to a paper published in *The Lancet*, cases of tuberculosis (TB) in London, UK, have risen by nearly 50% since 1999, giving London the dubious honour of being the TB capital of Western Europe. The increase in infection rates has been blamed on the 'Victorian' living conditions of low-quality, badly ventilated and overcrowded housing in certain London boroughs. Increased infection rates are predominately found among migrants; however, 85% of those infected migrants have lived in the UK for more than 2 years, suggesting that they are being infected with the disease in the UK. New York, USA, suffered an outbreak of multi-drug-resistant TB in 1990, the containment of which took a large investment in money and political support. It is hoped that the UK National Health Service will respond to calls for improvement in management and detection of TB to avoid the situation getting worse. *Lancet/BBC*

**Echinacea gets cold shoulder**

Preparations from plants of the genus *Echinacea* are often used as a remedy for the common cold. However, aside from a number of manufacturer-sponsored trials that reported a benefit, the effectiveness of using *Echinacea* to reduce the symptoms and duration of the common cold has remained

in doubt. Now, a study of 719 patients suffering from common colds has shown that treatment with *Echinacea* did not have a significant effect when compared with either a blinded placebo or no pills, although the trends were in the direction of benefit (with an average of a half-day reduction in the duration of a week-long cold). Such a modest benefit in terms of reducing the duration of symptoms is unlikely to justify the cost and inconvenience of going out to purchase an *Echinacea* preparation.

*Ann. Intern. Med./LA Times*

**Gains in war on malaria**

Since 2008, the United Nations anti-malaria programme has helped to reduce the number of malaria cases by more than 50% in 11 African countries and in two-thirds of the malaria-endemic countries outside of Africa, according to the WHO. Globally, infections have decreased slightly from 233 million in 2000 to 225 million in 2009, despite an increase in the population, and deaths have also decreased from 985,000 to 781,000 for the same period. However, the dramatic results of this programme, which has helped to buy insecticides, bed nets and anti-malarial drugs for millions, are threatened by a continuing shortfall in the amount of money needed to combat the disease and by the emergence of drug-resistant malarial strains in Cambodia and Thailand, leading to calls for further funding requirements to be met and for single drug therapies to be banned.

*Washington Post*

**Outbreak news**

**Avian influenza.** Migratory birds of several species have died in different regions of Japan as a result of infection with H5N1 avian influenza virus. A hooded crane was killed on the Izumi plain in Kagoshima prefecture, Japan's largest crane wintering site, while further north in Tottori, a swan found dying led to the discovery of 23 more dead birds. The 2003 avian influenza outbreak quickly spread along migratory routes from Hong Kong through Asia to Europe and Africa, raising concerns that the latest outbreak might follow a similar course. *NY Times/ProMED-mail*

*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 our Twitter page (@NatureRevMicro)*