



Name change? This virus, infecting a cell, may soon be called Middle East respiratory virus coronavirus.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES

Amid Heightened Concerns, New Name for Novel Coronavirus Emerges

Much remains unclear about the deadly new coronavirus that surfaced in the Arabian Peninsula last summer and continues to kill people. But if an international group of scientists and public health experts gets its way, at least one thing about the pathogen will be clear soon: its name. In hopes of putting to rest confusion over what the virus should be called, the Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) has proposed naming it after the Middle East—a recommendation supported by the World Health Organization (WHO) that could nonetheless prove controversial because some see geographical virus names as stigmatizing.

Under the proposal, the new virus would be called Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV); patients would likely be called MERS cases, and a global outbreak, if it erupts, might be the MERS pandemic.

The proposal, soon to be published as a letter in a scientific journal, comes just as Saudi Arabia has revealed a new wave of infections with the virus after a 6-week lull. As *Science* went to press, the country had reported 13 new cases and seven deaths in just 5 days—bringing the total worldwide to 30 cases and 18 fatalities.

The onslaught of cases, and the lack of information about what's happening on the ground in Saudi Arabia, has sparked fresh worries that the virus might start spreading between humans and trigger a pandemic. And

some scientists say they hope the new name will catch on soon because attention should be on the worrisome epidemiological situation. MERS-Cov “is a fine compromise and I compliment the study group for coming up with it,” says public health expert Michael Osterholm, of the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. “But we have much more important work to do than argue about the name.”

Naming pathogens has become a tricky issue. Historically, many infectious disease agents—or the diseases themselves—have been named after the place where they were first found. But scientists and public health officials have increasingly shied away from that system to avoid stigmatizing a country, region, or town. The name for severe acute respiratory syndrome, a disease caused by another coronavirus, was carefully chosen in 2003 to avoid blaming China, where the pathogen emerged (*Science*, 15 March, p. 1264).

In the current case, confusion has reigned since the novel coronavirus was first reported by Ali Mohamed Zaki, an Egyptian microbiologist who isolated it in June 2012 from a patient at a hospital in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where Zaki worked at the time. Zaki sent the virus to Ron Fouchier's virology group at Erasmus MC in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, which characterized it further. The group provisionally called the virus HCoV-EMC/2012, short for human coronavirus-Erasmus MC.

That reference didn't sit well with Saudi health officials, who said that Zaki lacked

authorization to send the virus to Rotterdam in the first place. Still, most researchers have used HCoV-EMC so far. WHO had adopted the more neutral “novel coronavirus”—abbreviated either as NCoV or nCoV—a name that by its very nature was not meant to last.

Given the risks of the new virus, it is important to end the confusion, says Raoul de Groot, a veterinary virologist at Utrecht University in the Netherlands who chairs the Coronavirus Study Group. A name referring to Jeddah or Saudi Arabia would have been unacceptable, he says—let alone one including the word Arab or Arabian. Although MERS is easy to remember and pronounce, it remains a geographical name, and tweets calling it as an “insult” and an “ethnic slur” started flying after *Science* revealed the proposal in a story online. But the name does not have to be stigmatizing “because the Middle East is a very large region,” De Groot says. Infections with the new virus have so far been found in residents of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. There has also been a cluster of three patients in the United Kingdom, the first one of which is believed to have contracted the virus during a trip to Saudi Arabia.

Coming up with the name was “an incredibly difficult task,” De Groot says; to assure wide adoption of the name, the group consulted extensively with coronavirus researchers and other parties, such as WHO and the Saudi Ministry of Health; all eventually agreed, he says, and the letter will be signed not just by the nine study group members but a broader group. A WHO spokesperson confirms that the agency is on board and that the statement will be signed by at least one WHO official.

Meanwhile, just what the virus is up to is anyone's guess. The 13 recently reported patients have all been linked to a hospital in Hofuf, in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province; but how they became infected, or whether there is human-to-human transmission, remains unclear. “It seems like a big cluster,” says Matthew Frieman, a coronavirus researcher at the University of Maryland School of Medicine in Baltimore, “but we still don't have much information at all about the patients and their co-morbidities,” or existing illnesses. Osterholm worries there may be more cases that Saudi Arabia hasn't identified or revealed yet. The country has to aggressively investigate the outbreak and promptly share the results with the world, he says. “It could make the difference between a local event and a global catastrophe.”

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