

In the news

NOVEL CORONAVIRUS SPREADS

With the identification of a family cluster of novel coronavirus (NCoV) infections in the UK and a single new case in Saudi Arabia in February 2013, the number of confirmed NCoV infections has risen to 13, seven of which were fatal (*WHO*, 21 Feb 2013). The UK cluster appears to have originated from a man who recently travelled to Saudi Arabia, where NCoV was first isolated in September 2012. After two of the man's family members also fell ill, John Watson, the head of the UK's Health Protection Agency, said that such a cluster "suggests that person-to-person transmission occurred" but gave no reason for increased alarm, as indicated by an unchanged risk assessment from the WHO (*Reuters*, 13 Feb 2013).

The ability of NCoV to spread between humans was previously unclear, although an 11-person cluster of pneumonia in a Jordanian hospital in April 2012 hinted that it was possible. NCoV was confirmed in the two fatal cases, and the nine non-fatal cases were probable, but unconfirmed, NCoV infections. WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl said, "Even if the cases in Jordan were human-to-human spread — and we don't know that — it wasn't sustained." (*NPR*, 30 Nov 2012.)

Volker Thiel, lead author of one of the first NCoV studies, said his research showed that the virus "was just as well adapted to infecting the human respiratory tract as other coronaviruses like SARS and the common cold viruses". Thiel pointed out that the future of the virus is uncertain, but he reiterated the sentiments of the WHO by stating that "So far it looks like the virus is well contained, so in that sense I don't see any reason for increased fear" (*Reuters*, 19 Feb 2013). Professor Ian Jones, a virologist at the University of Reading, UK, said that "Although it is severe, it's not doing anything worse than some other respiratory infections, it's just a new one." (*BBC News*, 13 Feb 2013.)

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