

Irish cases of West Nile Virus in persons having travelled to Algarve (Portugal)

Situation

Ireland has reported two cases of infection due to West Nile Virus in Irish citizens thought to have been exposed in the Algarve Region of Portugal between 26/6/04 and 10/7/04, one of whom is displaying symptoms and signs of encephalitis. The cases have been confirmed by the UK Health Protection Agency. Ireland and France have adopted a temporary deferral policy for blood donors having stayed in Portugal. The UK has recommended to travellers to protect themselves against mosquitoes. Portugal has reinforced surveillance of West Nile Virus in humans and animals.

Background

Countries around the Mediterranean have seen sporadic WNV activity over the last 40 years involving human, mammalian, avian and vector infection. Autochthonous European cases appear occasionally, most recently in France. Results of studies during the 1960s and 1970s suggest there may have been low-level transmission of the virus in Portugal in the past, although these are the first reported clinical cases of WNV disease acquired in Portugal. Portuguese authorities were notified of the initial diagnosis and have started a national action plan, which involves strengthening the mechanisms of vigilance related to human and animal health and mosquitoes.

Commission response

Members of the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS), networking the EU national health authorities responsible for the control of communicable diseases, have discussed the event in an audio-conference called by the European Commission. In this conference it has been reported that, beside the mentioned surveillance activated in Portugal, France and Italy have a surveillance plan of WNV in horses, birds and suspected human cases. Surveillance of suspect human cases in high risk areas is active also in Spain. Participants agreed that the present event does not impact significantly on levels of public health risk. Cases of WNV infection will be however notified immediately to the EWRS, according to Decision 2119/98/EC and Decision 2000/57/EC. A case definition is being prepared to promote comparable surveillance schemes.

Member States action

Since we are in a period of increased risk of WNV-infection, we would like to draw attention to the need for seamless collaboration between the national public health authorities responsible for notifications and for measures to control communicable diseases and those competent for blood transfusion. Since several crucial parameters, such as the 'area of risk' and 'on-going transmission to humans' must be considered and accurately interpreted to allow appropriate risk assessment and decisions on measures, such as the application of a deferral period for blood donors after leaving an area with ongoing transmission of WNV to humans, it would be necessary to ensure that scientific opinion and regulatory action throughout the European Community are coherent, especially since Community provisions apply to blood transfusion (Directive 2002/98/EC and Commission Directive 2004/33/EC.)