

**PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE**

**Department of Health**

**Senate Select Committee on COVID-19**

**Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic**

**22 May 2020**

**PDR Number: IQ20-000252**

**Question Subject: Internal briefings**

**Type of Question: Written**

**Senator: Rex Patrick**

**Question:**

In answer to a question on notice the Health Minister has advised that "The Chief Medical Officer and Minister for Health were apprised of the situation through internal briefings in early January 2020.

- A. Precisely on what date in "early January" were internal health briefings provided to the CMO and the Health Minister? On what dates?
- B. Please provide the Committee with copies of those early briefings?

**Answer:**

The Acting Chief Medical Officer (CMO) was first alerted to the situation unfolding in Wuhan, China, by National Incident Room in the Department of Health informally on 3 January 2020.

Updates, through formal channels, were provided to the CMO, the Deputy CMO and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee through "*Event Update 1 – Viral Pneumonia China*" ([Attachment A](#)) on 9 January 2020, and "*Viral Pneumonia China NIR-2238 Stakeholder Update 1*" ([Attachment B](#)) on 10 January 2020, both distributed by the National Incident Room on behalf of the Department of Health.

The Office of Health Protection provided formal notification of key points regarding a pneumonia cluster in Wuhan City, China, to the Health Minister's Office on 9 January 2020 ([Attachment C](#)).



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health**  
National Incident Room

## Viral Pneumonia - China

### Report Details

<b>Report Type</b>	Event Update
<b>Issued</b>	2020-01-09
<b>Reference</b>	NIR #2238
<b>Update</b>	1

### Key Points

- Public media reporting suggests genetic sequencing has confirmed that the causative agent of the cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, Hubei Province China is a novel coronavirus.
- To date there has been 44 hospitalised cases of viral pneumonia in Wuhan reported to Australia's National Focal Point (World Health Organization (WHO) Event Information Site report 05 January 2020) However, open source media is reporting 59 cases (09 January 2020).
- There appears to be a common epidemiological link, where those affected attended (as vendors, traders or customers) a live seafood market. Media is reporting that the market also sold birds, other animals and organs from wildlife.
- Chinese health authorities have implemented monitoring, control and prevention measures including contact tracing, isolation of cases and public risk communications. The market was closed and has undergone environmental sanitation and disinfection.
- There is no evidence of ongoing human to human transmission at this time. Additionally, there has been no reported transmission to health care workers.
- There has been no reported deaths linked to this outbreak.
- Investigation and laboratory testing in China is ongoing.
- The Department of Health is maintaining a watching brief on this outbreak through information provided by the WHO under the International Health Regulations (IHR) and Australia's National Focal Point; domestic communicable diseases surveillance systems; and publicly accessible information.
- Australia has excellent public health laboratory capacity to test for and identify viral and bacterial agents and strong public health systems and border measures to detect and manage ill travellers.

- High volumes of Chinese nationals undertaking international travel during the upcoming Lunar New Year season has prompted some Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan to implement increased border surveillance.
- This novel coronavirus is not a Listed Human Disease (LHD) under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, however existing processes for screening ill travellers at the border will capture individuals presenting with a fever. Should it become necessary, a disease can be determined as an LHD very quickly.
- If travellers returning from China, specifically the Hubei Province, become unwell they should seek medical attention and advice from their General Practitioner.

## Response Actions

### China

National authorities have reported the following response measures:

- One hundred and twenty-one close contacts have been identified and are under medical observation;
- The follow-up of close contacts is ongoing;
- Pathogen identification and the tracing of the cause is ongoing;
- Wuhan Municipal Health Commission carried out active case finding, and retrospective investigations have been completed;
- Environmental sanitation and further hygiene investigations are under way.
- China has a Physical Containment Level 4 Laboratory, based in Wuhan, where laboratory testing is being undertaken.

### Australia

- The National Incident Room is maintaining a watching brief on this outbreak.
- Through the Victoria Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory, Pathwest (WA) and the Institute for Clinical Pathology and Medical Research (NSW) capability to detect the novel coronavirus is being established.
- No specific measures are recommended for travellers to Australia at this time. This is consistent with the recommendations of the WHO under the IHR.
- Due to the lack of evidence for human-to-human or prolonged transmission, and unknown vector for transmission no changes to Smarttraveller are recommended at this time.
- Relevant outbreak response plans such as the Emergency Response Plan for Communicable Disease Incidents of National Significance and a Series of National Guidelines for Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS-CoV) are available to guide an initial response should Australia get a case:
  - [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/7A38C92C483C8B77CA25805E001A402D/\\$File/CDPLAN.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/7A38C92C483C8B77CA25805E001A402D/$File/CDPLAN.pdf)
  - [https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/DA7D2B43102293AECA257DC70081C245/\\$File/MERS-CoV-SoNG-sep2015.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/DA7D2B43102293AECA257DC70081C245/$File/MERS-CoV-SoNG-sep2015.pdf)
- There is a suite of information about MERS-CoV on the Department of Health's website that could be readily adapted for a novel coronavirus once more is known.
- The National Medical Stockpile holds a store of surgical masks and P2 respirators as a strategic reserve to boost the national response if required.
- The NIR will continue to review any available information on the outbreak and will update advice as and when required.

### Additional Background Information

- Human coronaviruses are common throughout the world.
- Common human coronaviruses commonly inhabit the gastrointestinal and respiratory mucosal membranes, and usually cause mild to moderate upper-respiratory tract illnesses, like the common cold as well as diarrhoea.
- Human coronaviruses can sometimes cause lower-respiratory tract illnesses, such as pneumonia or bronchitis. This is more common in people with cardiopulmonary disease, people with weakened immune systems, infants, and older adults.
- Two human coronaviruses, MERS-CoV and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) have been known to cause severe illness and higher rates of morbidity and mortality. MERS cases continue to occur, primarily in the Arabian Peninsula. No human cases of SARS have been reported anywhere in the world since 2004.
- It is the potential clinical severity of MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV has led to intensified global interest and the heightened concerns around disease transmission.
- SARS-CoV is a Tier 1 Security Sensitive Biological Agent under the Security Sensitive Biological Agents Regulatory Scheme.

#### Authorised By

Celia Street, FAS Office of Health Protection

#### Distribution

AHPPC, CDNA, PHLN and NHEMS.

#### Further Information

This report is issued by the Australian National Focal Point (NFP). The Australian NFP is located in the Office of Health Protection at the Australian Government Department of Health and its activities are supported 24/7 by the National Incident Room. The Australian NFP is established under the *National Health Security Act 2007*.

For more information on the event(s) in this report, contact the NFP at [health.ops@health.gov.au](mailto:health.ops@health.gov.au) or +61 (2) 6289 3030



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Health**  
National Incident Room

## Viral Pneumonia - China

### Report Details

<b>Report Type</b>	Stakeholder Update
<b>Issued</b>	2020-01-10
<b>Reference</b>	NIR #2238
<b>Update</b>	1

### Key Points

#### Epidemiological Situation

- Chinese authorities have made a preliminary determination of a novel (or new) coronavirus, identified in a hospitalised person with pneumonia in Wuhan, Hubei Province China<sup>1</sup>.
- There are many different coronaviruses that affect humans and animal including for example, coronaviruses that cause the common cold but also more clinical serious conditions such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).
- To date there has been 44 hospitalised cases of viral pneumonia in Wuhan reported to Australia's National Focal Point (World Health Organization (WHO) Event Information Site report 05 January 2020) However, open source media is reporting 59 cases (09 January 2020).
- There appears to be a common epidemiological link, where those affected attended (as vendors, traders or customers) a live seafood market. Media is reporting that the market also sold birds, other animals and organs from wildlife.<sup>2</sup>
- Chinese health authorities have implemented monitoring, control and prevention measures including contact tracing, isolation of cases and public risk communications. The market was closed and has undergone environmental sanitation and disinfection.<sup>2</sup>
- There is no evidence of ongoing human to human transmission at this time. Additionally, there has been no reported transmission to health care workers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> WHO Statement Regarding Cluster of Pneumonia Cases in Wuhan, China <https://www.who.int/china/news/detail/09-01-2020-who-statement-regarding-cluster-of-pneumonia-cases-in-wuhan-china> - accessed 10 January 2020

<sup>2</sup> WHO Disease Outbreak News, Pneumonia of unknown cause - China [https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/?fbclid=IwAR3dxY\\_pqmycpud1Isjr4DxYblsDnum1WGqnoFf\\_IsyR4PBQLrC4F1\\_oww](https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/?fbclid=IwAR3dxY_pqmycpud1Isjr4DxYblsDnum1WGqnoFf_IsyR4PBQLrC4F1_oww) - accessed 10 January 2020

- There has been no reported deaths linked to this outbreak.<sup>2</sup>
- Investigation and laboratory testing in China is ongoing.

Full detail at [Appendix A](#).

## Response Actions

### **China**

National authorities have reported the following response measures:

- One hundred and twenty-one close contacts have been identified and are under medical observation;
- Pathogen identification and the tracing of the cause is ongoing;
- Wuhan Municipal Health Commission carried out active case finding, and retrospective investigations have been completed;
- Environmental sanitation and further hygiene investigations are under way.<sup>2</sup>

### **Australia**

- The National Incident Room is actively monitoring this outbreak.
- No specific measures are recommended for travellers to Australia at this time. This is consistent with the recommendations of the WHO under the IHR.<sup>2</sup>

Full detail at [Appendix B](#).

## Risk

More comprehensive information is required to understand the current status and epidemiology of the outbreak, and the clinical picture. Further investigations are also required to confirm the source, modes of transmission, extent of infection and any effective medical countermeasures.

Chinese authorities have noted, while the virus in question can cause severe illness in some patients, it does not transmit readily between people.

Australia has excellent public health laboratory capacity to test for and identify viral and bacterial agents and strong public health systems and border measures to detect and manage ill travellers.

## Planned Action

### **Australian National Focal Point (Health)**

- The National Incident Room will continue to review any available information on the outbreak and will update advice as and when required.
- More information around human-to-human or prolonged transmission, and potential vectors is needed before a formal risk assessment can be completed.

**Authorised By**

Celia Street, FAS Office of Health Protection

**Distribution**

MO (Health, FA, HA, AWR), AHPPC, CDNA, PHLN, NHEMS, Health (OHP SES, OHP MSAU, OHP EL2, IADHB, Media), DAWR, DFAT (Humanitarian, Health Policy, CHS), DIO, HA (ABF, EMA, Health Policy), PM&C

**Further Information**

This report is issued by the Australian National Focal Point (NFP). The Australian NFP is located in the Office of Health Protection at the Australian Government Department of Health and its activities are supported 24/7 by the National Incident Room. The Australian NFP is established under the *National Health Security Act 2007*.

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## Appendix A: Epidemiological Situation

### Situation

- On 31 December 2019, the WHO China Country Office was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown aetiology (unknown cause) detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. As of 3 January 2020, a total of 44 patients with pneumonia of unknown aetiology have been reported to WHO by the national authorities in China. Of the 44 cases reported, 11 were severely ill, while the remaining 33 patients are in stable condition.<sup>2</sup>
- Chinese national authorities report that all patients were isolated and received treatment in Wuhan medical institutions.<sup>2</sup>
- China has strong public health capacities and resources to respond and manage respiratory disease outbreaks.<sup>1</sup>
- Preliminary identification of a novel virus in a short period of time is a notable achievement and demonstrates China's increased capacity to manage new outbreaks and share information.<sup>1</sup>
- In addition to treating the patients in care and isolating new cases as they may be identified, public health officials remain focused on continued contact tracing, conducting environmental assessments at the seafood market, and investigations to confirm the identity of the pathogen causing the outbreak.<sup>1</sup>
- High volumes of Chinese nationals undertaking international travel during the upcoming Lunar New Year season has prompted some Asian countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand and Taiwan to implement increased border surveillance.<sup>3</sup>

### Background

- Human coronaviruses are common throughout the world.
- Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses with some causing less-severe disease, such as the common cold, and others more severe disease such as MERS and SARS. Some transmit easily from person to person, while others do not. According to Chinese authorities, the virus in question can cause severe illness in some patients and does not transmit readily between people.<sup>1</sup>
- It is the potential clinical severity of MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV has led to intensified global interest and the heightened concerns around disease transmission.

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<sup>3</sup> China's new virus looms over Lunar New Year travel <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Society/China-s-new-virus-looms-over-Lunar-New-Year-travel> - accessed 10 January 2020



## Appendix B: Response Actions

### In-Country

- China has a Physical Containment Level 4 Laboratory, based in Wuhan, where laboratory testing is being undertaken.

### Border Measures in Australia

- No specific measures are recommended for travellers to Australia at this time. This is consistent with the recommendations of the WHO under the IHR.
- This novel coronavirus is not an LHD under the *Biosecurity Act 2015*, however existing processes for screening ill travellers at the border will capture individuals presenting with a fever. Should it become necessary, a disease can be determined as an LHD very quickly.

### Laboratory Testing in Australia

- The preliminary determination of a novel coronavirus assists with disease detection and response.<sup>1</sup>
- Through the Victoria Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory, Pathwest (WA), Queensland Health Forensic and Scientific Services and the Institute for Clinical Pathology and Medical Research (NSW) there is good capability to test for coronaviruses and capability to detect this novel coronavirus is being established.

ATTACHMENT C

From: [REDACTED]@health.gov.au>  
Sent: Thursday, 9 January 2020 10:47 AM  
To: [REDACTED]@health.gov.au>  
Cc: [REDACTED]@health.gov.au>  
Subject: FW: TPs on "wuhan" virus [SEC=OFFICIAL]  
Sensitivity: Private

Good morning

I hope this email finds you well.

Please find below TPs we provided to DFAT in relation to a virus in China. We understand that DFAT has provided the TPs to their MO and we didn't want you to be caught off guard!!

Informally we have learned that it's a novel virus with no new cases so unlikely to be of any border concern. However we're awaiting confirmation.

Happy to discuss

Kind regards

C

Sent with BlackBerry Work  
(www.blackberry.com)

From: [REDACTED].gov.au>  
Sent: Wednesday, 8 January 2020 12:26 PM  
To: [REDACTED]@dfat.gov.au>  
Cc: [REDACTED]@dfat.gov.au>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]health.gov.au>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]@health.gov.au>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]@health.gov.au>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]@health.gov.au>; [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]@health.gov.au>; zz [External]  
[REDACTED]@health.gov.au [REDACTED]@health.gov.au>  
Subject: RE: Fw Cable: [SH510188L] - Reports of a respiratory disease outbreak in Wuhan lead to rumours of a SARS-like virus. [SEC=OFFICIAL]  
Importance: High  
Sensitivity: Private

[REDACTED]

Again, apologies for the delay on these points. These are provided from the Office of Health Protection for DFAT's use.

Best regards

[REDACTED]

Re pneumonia cluster in Wuhan City, China

\* To date there have been 44 hospitalised cases of pneumonia

ATTACHMENT C

associated with an unidentified cause in Hubei Province, China (as per WHO EIS Report 05.01.2020 - noting that open source media is reporting 59 cases) .

\* Chinese health authorities have implemented monitoring, control and prevention measures including contact tracing, isolation of cases and public risk communications. The market was closed and has undergone environmental sanitation and disinfection.

\* There is no significant evidence of human to human transmission at this time.

\* There has been no reported deaths linked to this outbreak.

\* There appears to be a common epidemiological link, where those affected attended (as vendors, traders or customers) a live seafood market. Media is reporting that the market also sells birds, other animals and organs from wildlife.

\* Initial laboratory testing has excluded influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome and other common respiratory diseases.

\* Investigation and laboratory testing in China is ongoing.

\* It should be noted that it is winter time in the northern hemisphere and cases of pneumonia are not uncommon.

\* The Department of Health is maintaining a watching brief on this outbreak through information provided by the World Health Organization (WHO) under the International Health Regulations and Australia's National Focal Point; domestic communicable diseases surveillance systems; and publicly accessible information.

\* Australia has excellent public health laboratory capacity to test for and identify viral and bacterial agents and strong public health systems and border measures to detect and manage ill travellers.

\* It is difficult to assess the public health risk to Australia and Australians while the causative agent has not been identified.

\* Border countries such as Singapore and Hong Kong have implemented increased border surveillance. However, no specific measures are recommended for travellers to Australia until more is known. This is consistent with the recommendations of the WHO.

\* If travellers returning from China, specifically the Hubei Province, become unwell they should seek medical attention and advice from their General Practitioner.

██████████  
Director | Emergency Preparedness and Response

National Incident Room  
Health Emergency Management Branch | Office of Health  
Protection  
Australian Government Department of Health  
T: 02 ██████████ | M: ██████████ | E:  
██████████@health.gov.au

From: ██████████@dfat.gov.au>  
Sent: Wednesday, 8 January 2020 9:24 AM  
To: ██████████@health.gov.au>  
Cc: ██████████@dfat.gov.au>; ██████████  
██████████@dfat.gov.au>

**ATTACHMENT C**

Subject: RE: Fw Cable: [SH510188L] - Reports of a respiratory disease outbreak in Wuhan lead to rumours of a SARS-like virus. [SEC=OFFICIAL]  
[SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

**Sensitivity: Private**