

PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY QUESTION ON NOTICE

Department of Health

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

Australian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thursday 23 April 2020

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Question Subject: World Health Organization (WHO) advice

Type of Questions: Question in Writing

Questioner: Senator Gallagher

Question:

Can a copy of the advice received by the department from the World Health Organization (WHO) on 1 January 2020 related to a cluster of pneumonia of unknown aetiology in Wuhan, China, be provided. On what other dates in January 2020 did the department receive advice about this cluster and can copies of that advice be provided.

Answer:

No specific advice was received on 1 January 2020 from the World Health Organization (WHO). On 1 January 2020, the Department of Health began monitoring the pneumonia cluster in Wuhan, China in response to an email from the Program for Monitoring Emerging Diseases (ProMED) subscription service advising of undiagnosed pneumonia cases in China.

On 5 January 2020, the WHO advised the Department of Health, as the International Health Regulations National Focal Point of Australia, of a cluster of pneumonia of unknown etiology reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. This advice was received through the WHO Event Information Site.

Further correspondence from the WHO relating to COVID-19 in January 2020 is noted in the table below. This advice is provided directly to designated National Focal Points under the *International Health Regulations (2005)* and not publicly available. However, WHO releases Disease Outbreak News articles based on this advice, with the permission of the notifying country. Where these are available, they have been provided at [Attachment A](#).

WHO EIS Notification (Date – Geneva time)	Associated Disease Outbreak News article
5 January 2020	Pneumonia of unknown cause – China - 5 January 2020
8 January 2020	
12 January 2020	Novel coronavirus – China - 12 January 2020
14 January 2020	Novel coronavirus – Thailand (ex-China) - 14 January 2020
16 January 2020	Novel coronavirus – Japan (ex-China) - 16 January 2020
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Pneumonia of unknown cause – China

Disease outbreak news

5 January 2020

On 31 December 2019, the WHO China Country Office was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology (unknown cause) detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. As of 3 January 2020, a total of 44 patients with pneumonia of unknown etiology have been reported to WHO by the national authorities in China. Of the 44 cases reported, 11 are severely ill, while the remaining 33 patients are in stable condition. According to media reports, the concerned market in Wuhan was closed on 1 January 2020 for environmental sanitation and disinfection.

The causal agent has not yet been identified or confirmed. On 1 January 2020, WHO requested further information from national authorities to assess the risk.

National authorities report that all patients are isolated and receiving treatment in Wuhan medical institutions. The clinical signs and symptoms are mainly fever, with a few patients having difficulty in breathing, and chest radiographs showing invasive lesions of both lungs.

According to the authorities, some patients were operating dealers or vendors in the Huanan Seafood market. Based on the preliminary information from the Chinese investigation team, no evidence of significant human-to-human transmission and no health care worker infections have been reported.

Public Health Response

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 are underway;

Wuhan Municipal Health Commission carried out active case finding, and retrospective investigations have been completed;

Environmental sanitation and further hygiene investigations are under way.

WHO is closely monitoring the situation and is in close contact with national authorities in China.

WHO risk assessment

There is limited information to determine the overall risk of this reported cluster of pneumonia of unknown etiology. The reported link to a wholesale fish and live animal market could indicate an exposure link to animals. The symptoms reported among the patients are common to several respiratory diseases, and pneumonia is common in the winter season; however, the occurrence of 44 cases of pneumonia requiring hospitalization clustered in space and time should be handled prudently.

Wuhan city, with a population of 19 million, is the capital city of Hubei province, with a population of 58 million people. WHO has requested further information on the laboratory tests performed and the differential diagnoses considered.

WHO advice

Based on information provided by national authorities, WHO's recommendations on public health measures and surveillance of influenza and severe acute respiratory infections still apply.

WHO does not recommend any specific measures for travellers. In case of symptoms suggestive of respiratory illness either during or after travel, travellers are encouraged to seek medical attention and share travel history with their healthcare provider.

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on China based on the current information available on this event.

Novel Coronavirus – China

Disease outbreak news : Update

12 January 2020

On 11 and 12 January 2020, WHO received further detailed information from the National Health Commission about the outbreak.

WHO is reassured of the quality of the ongoing investigations and the response measures implemented in Wuhan, and the commitment to share information regularly.

The evidence is highly suggestive that the outbreak is associated with exposures in one seafood market in Wuhan. The market was closed on 1 January 2020. At this stage, there is no infection among healthcare workers, and no clear evidence of human to human transmission. The Chinese authorities continue their work of intensive surveillance and follow up measures, as well as further epidemiological investigations.

Among the 41 confirmed cases, there has been one death. This death occurred in a patient with serious underlying medical conditions.

China shared the genetic sequence of the novel coronavirus on 12 January, which will be of great importance for other countries to use in developing specific diagnostic kits.

The cluster was initially reported on 31 December 2019, when the WHO China Country Office was informed. The Chinese authorities identified a new type of coronavirus (novel coronavirus, nCoV), which was isolated on 7 January 2020. Laboratory testing was conducted on all suspected cases identified through active case finding and retrospective review. Other respiratory pathogens such as influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) were ruled out as the cause.

According to information conveyed to WHO by Chinese authorities on 11 and 12 January, 41 cases with novel coronavirus infection have been preliminarily diagnosed in Wuhan City. Of the 41 cases reported, seven are severely ill. This is when the one death, mentioned above, was reported, in a patient with other underlying health conditions. Six patients have been discharged from hospital. Symptom onset of the 41 confirmed nCoV cases ranges from 8 December 2019 to 2 January 2020. No additional cases have been detected since 3 January 2020.

The clinical signs and symptoms reported are mainly fever, with a few cases having difficulty in breathing, and chest radiographs showing invasive pneumonic infiltrates in both lungs. National authorities report that patients have been isolated and are receiving treatment in Wuhan medical institutions.

According to the preliminary epidemiological investigation, most cases worked at or were handlers and frequent visitors to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market. The government reports that there is no clear evidence that the virus passes easily from person to person.

Currently, no case with infection of this novel coronavirus has been reported elsewhere other than Wuhan.

Public Health Response

China's National Health Commission has deployed a group of experts to Wuhan City to support the local response.

National authorities have reported the following response measures:

A total of 763 close contacts including healthcare workers, have been identified and followed up and no additional cases of infection with the novel coronavirus have been identified;

The Wuhan Municipal Health Commission carried out active case finding, and retrospective investigations of the current cluster of patients have been completed

The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market has been temporarily closed to carry out environmental sanitation and disinfection;

Public risk communication activities have been carried out to improve public awareness and adoption of self-protection measures.

WHO is closely monitoring the situation and is in regular contact with national authorities in China to provide support required. Technical guidance on novel coronavirus has been developed and will continue to be updated as additional information is available.

WHO risk assessment

To date, investigations are still under way to assess the full extent of the outbreak.

Wuhan city is a major domestic and international transport hub. To date, there have been no reported cases outside of Wuhan City.

More comprehensive information and ongoing investigations are also required to better understand the epidemiology, clinical picture, source, modes of transmission, and extent of infection; as well as the countermeasures implemented.

WHO advice

Based on information provided by national authorities, WHO's recommendations on public health measures and surveillance for novel coronaviruses apply.

WHO does not recommend any specific health measures for travellers. In case of symptoms suggestive of respiratory illness either during or after travel, travellers are encouraged to seek medical attention and share travel history with their healthcare provider. Travel guidance has been updated.

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on China based on the information currently available on this event.

Novel Coronavirus – Thailand (ex-China)

Disease outbreak news

14 January 2020

On 13 January 2020, the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), Thailand reported the first imported case of lab-confirmed novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

The case is a 61-year-old Chinese woman living in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. On 5 January 2020, she developed fever with chills, sore throat and headache. On 8 January 2020, she took a direct flight to Thailand from Wuhan City together with five family members in a tour group of 16 people. The traveler with febrile illness was detected on the same day by thermal surveillance at Suvarnabhumi Airport (BKK), Thailand, and was hospitalized the same day. After temperature check and initial assessment, she was transferred to the hospital for further investigations and treatment.

The patient's full exposure history is under investigation. She reported a history of visiting a local fresh market in Wuhan on regular basis prior to the onset of illness on 5 January 2020; however, she did not report visiting the Huanan South China Seafood Market from where most of the cases were detected. Samples tested positive for coronaviruses by reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) on 12 January 2020. The genomic sequencing analysis performed by Emerging Infectious Diseases Health Science Center, the Thai Red Cross Society (EID-TRC) and the Thai National Institute of Health (Thai NIH), Department of Medical Sciences confirmed that the patient was infected with the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) which was isolated in Wuhan, China (for more information, please see the Disease Outbreak News published on 12 January 2020).

As of this writing, the patient is in a stable condition and in hospital.

Public health response

The Ministry of Public Health Thailand implemented measures for screening travelers from Wuhan city on 3 January 2020 at Suvarnabhumi Airport, Don Mueang, Phuket and Chiang Mai airports, and activated enhanced surveillance at public and private hospitals. Since the identification of the case on 5 January 2019, Thai health authorities have taken the following measures:

Eight febrile travelers were detected by a thermo-scan at Suvarnabhumi Airport. They have been isolated and tested, and none of them have been confirmed with 2019-nCov infection.

A total of 182 contacts were identified and are being monitored. The contacts were fellow passengers as well as members of the same tour group. Only one contact developed respiratory symptoms and the PCR test of throat swab yields positive for Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV).

Risk communication guidance has been shared with the public and a hotline has been established by the Department of Disease Control for people returning from the affected area in China with related symptoms.

The Ministry of Public Health of Thailand has international-standard diagnosis and medical care, and is closely coordinating with WHO and related departments for the potential response measures.

WHO risk assessment

This is the first exported case of novel coronavirus from Wuhan city, China. Since the initial report of cases in Wuhan city on 31 December 2019, 41 cases have a preliminary diagnosis of 2019-nCoV infection, including 1 death in a person with severe underlying medical conditions (for more information, please see the Disease Outbreak News published on 12 January 2020).

As the traveler did not report having visited the market linked to most of the other cases, it is vital that investigations continue to identify the source of infection. To date, China has not reported any cases of infection among healthcare workers or contacts of the cases. Based on the available information there is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission. No additional cases have been detected since 3 January 2020 in China.

Additional investigation is needed to ascertain the presence of human-to-human transmission, modes of transmission, common source of exposure and the presence of asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic cases that are undetected. It is critical to review all available information to fully understand the potential transmissibility among humans.

WHO advice

Health authorities should work with travel, transport and tourism sectors to provide travelers with information to reduce the general risk of acute respiratory infections via travel health clinics, travel agencies, conveyance operators and at points of entry.

WHO has provided interim guidance for novel coronaviruses .

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on Thailand based on the information currently available on this event.

Novel Coronavirus – Japan (ex-China)

Disease outbreak news

16 January 2020

The Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, today informed the World Health Organization (WHO) of a confirmed case of a novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) in a person who travelled to Wuhan, China. This is the second confirmed case of 2019-nCoV that has been detected outside of China, following confirmation of a case in Thailand on 13 January. Considering global travel patterns, additional cases in other countries are likely.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. 2019-nCoV is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans.

Much remains to be understood about the new coronavirus, which was first identified in China earlier this month. Not enough is known about 2019-nCoV to draw definitive conclusions about how it is transmitted, clinical features of disease, or the extent to which it has spread. The source also remains unknown.

WHO encourages all countries to continue preparedness activities. On 10 January, WHO published information on how to monitor for cases, treat patients, prevent onward transmission in health care facilities, maintain necessary supplies, and communicate with the public about 2019-nCoV. The information includes advice on how to maintain hand and respiratory hygiene, and safe food and market practices. WHO is developing and updating this information in consultation with networks of experts across the globe.

WHO's interim guidance and other information on coronaviruses can be found [here](#)

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions based on the information available. If travellers develop respiratory illness before, during or after travel, they should seek medical attention and share travel history with their health care provider.

Novel Coronavirus – Japan (ex-China)

Disease outbreak news

17 January 2020

On 15 January 2020, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Japan (MHLW) reported an imported case of laboratory-confirmed 2019-novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) from Wuhan, Hubei Province, China.

The case-patient is male, between the age of 30-39 years, living in Japan.

The case-patient travelled to Wuhan, China in late December and developed fever on 3 January 2020 while staying in Wuhan. He did not visit the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market or any other live animal markets in Wuhan. He has indicated that he was in close contact with a person with pneumonia.

On 6 January, he traveled back to Japan and tested negative for influenza when he visited a local clinic on the same day.

On 10 January 2020, due to his continued symptoms of cough, sore throat and fever, he visited a local hospital and was found to have abnormal chest x-ray with infiltrates. He was admitted to the hospital on the same day and had remained febrile until 14 January. On 14 January, his attending doctor notified the case to a local public health authority under the surveillance system for “Unidentified Serious Infectious Illness”.

Samples were collected and sent to the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (NIID), and at NIID, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing and sequencing was performed twice, which identified very small amount of 2019-nCoV RNA on 15 January 2020.

On 15 January, the case-patient was afebrile and was discharged from hospital. Currently, he is staying at home in a stable condition.

Public health response

Contact tracing and other epidemiological investigations are underway by the local health authorities in Japan;

The Japanese Government has scaled up a whole-of-government coordination mechanism on the 16 January;

The MHLW has strengthened surveillance for undiagnosed severe acute respiratory illnesses since the report of undiagnosed pneumonia in Wuhan, China;

From 6 January, MHLW requested local health governments to be aware of the respiratory illnesses in Wuhan by using the existing surveillance system for serious infectious illness with unknown etiology;

NIID is supporting local authorities on epidemiologic investigations including contact tracing;

Quarantine and screening measures have been enhanced for travelers from Wuhan city at the point of entries since 7 January;

NIID established an in-house PCR assay for nCoV on 16 January;

Revision of the risk assessment by NIID is being conducted, including case definition of close contacts;

The public risk communication has been enhanced;

A hotline has been established among the different ministries in the government;

The MHLW is working closely with WHO and other related Member States to foster mutual investigations and information sharing.

WHO risk assessment

This was the second of three exported cases of novel coronavirus from Wuhan city, China. Since the initial report of cases in Wuhan city on 31 December 2019, and as of 12 January 2020, 41 laboratory-confirmed cases of nCoV infection, including 2 deaths in cases with underlying medical conditions have been reported to WHO. Two cases have been reported from Thailand.

The source of the outbreak is still under investigation in Wuhan. Preliminary investigations have identified environmental samples positive for nCoV in Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan City, however some laboratory-confirmed patients did not report visiting this market. To date, there is no reported infection among healthcare workers in China, Thailand or Japan. No additional cases have been reported since 3 January in China.

Additional investigations are needed to determine how the patients were infected, whether human-to-human transmission has been observed, mode(s) of transmission, the clinical spectrum of disease, and the extent of infection, including presence of subclinical cases that are undetected with current surveillance.

It is critical to review all available information to fully understand the extent of transmissibility between people and likelihood of zoonotic spillover.

WHO advice

Although the source of the novel coronavirus causing this cluster of pneumonia and the mode(s) of transmission are unknown, it would be prudent to remind populations and health workers of the basic principles to reduce the general risk of transmission of acute respiratory infections:

Avoiding close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections;

Frequent hand-washing, especially after direct contact with ill people or their environment;

Avoiding unprotected contact with farm or wild animals;

People with symptoms of acute respiratory infection should practice cough etiquette (maintain distance, cover coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues or clothing, and wash hands);

Within healthcare facilities, enhance standard infection prevention and control practices in hospitals, especially in emergency departments;

WHO does not recommend any specific health measures for travelers. In case of symptoms suggestive of respiratory illness either during or after travel, the travelers are encouraged to seek medical attention and share their travel history with their health care provider. Travel guidance has been updated.

Health authorities should work with travel, transport and tourism sectors to provide travellers with information to reduce the general risk of acute respiratory infections via travel health clinics, travel agencies, conveyance operators and at points of entry.

WHO has provided interim guidance for novel coronaviruses

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on Japan based on the information currently available on this event.

Novel Coronavirus – Republic of Korea (ex-China)

Disease outbreak news

21 January 2020

On 20 January 2020, National IHR Focal Point (NFP) for Republic of Korea reported the first case of novel coronavirus in the Republic of Korea. The case is a 35-year-old female, Chinese national, residing in Wuhan, Hubei province in China.

The case-patient had developed fever, chill, and muscle pain on 18 January while in Wuhan. She visited a local hospital in Wuhan and was initially diagnosed with a cold. On 19 January, the case-patient was detected with fever (38.3 °C) upon arrival at the Incheon International Airport. The case-patient was transferred to a national designated isolation hospital for testing and treatment. She was tested positive for pancoronavirus reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) assay, and subsequently was confirmed positive for novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) on 20 January by sequencing at the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC). Upon detection, the patient had chills, runny nose, and muscle pain.

The case-patient did not report visiting any markets, including Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, nor did she have known contact with confirmed 2019-nCoV cases or wild animals in Wuhan city.

The case-patient is currently under isolation, receiving treatment and is in a stable condition.

Public health response

Contact tracing and other epidemiological investigation are underway;

The government of the Republic of Korea has scaled up the national alert level from Blue (Level 1) to Yellow (Level 2 out of 4-level national crisis management system);

The Republic of Korea health authority has strengthened surveillance for pneumonia cases in health facilities nationwide since 3 January 2020;

Quarantine and screening measures have been enhanced for travelers from Wuhan at the point of entries (PoE) since 3 January 2020;

Public risk communication has been enhanced.

WHO risk assessment

This is the fourth internationally exported case of 2019-nCoV from Wuhan City, China by travelers. Since the initial report of cases on 31 December 2019, and as of 20 January 2020, 278 laboratory-confirmed cases of 2019-nCoV infection including six deaths were reported to WHO globally from China, two cases from Thailand, one case from Japan, and one case from the Republic of Korea. In China, 51 are severe cases, and 12 cases are critically ill. They are all under isolation treatment at designated medical institutions in Wuhan. Among the cases reported in China, 14 cases have been reported from Guangdong province, five from Beijing municipality and one from Shanghai municipality.

The source of the outbreak is still under investigation in Wuhan City. Preliminary investigations have identified environmental samples positive for nCoV in Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan City, however some laboratory-confirmed patients did not report visiting this market. Cases continue to be reported from Wuhan City, and from other provinces in China. Additional investigations are needed to determine how the patients were

infected, the extent of human-to-human transmission, the clinical spectrum of disease, and the geographic range of infection.

WHO advice

It is prudent to remind populations and health workers of the basic principles to reduce the general risk of transmission of acute respiratory infections by following the below mentioned measures:

Avoiding close contact with people suffering from acute respiratory infections;

Frequent hand-washing, especially after direct contact with ill people or their environment;

Avoiding unprotected contact with farm or wild animals;

People with symptoms of acute respiratory infection should practice cough etiquette (maintain distance, cover coughs and sneezes with disposable tissues or clothing, and wash hands);

Within healthcare facilities, enhance standard infection prevention and control practices in hospitals, especially in emergency departments.

WHO does not recommend any specific health measures for travelers. In case of symptoms suggestive of acute respiratory illness either during or after travel, the travelers are encouraged to seek medical attention and share their travel history with their health care provider. Health authorities should work with travel, transport and tourism sectors to provide travelers with information to reduce the general risk of acute respiratory infections via travel health clinics, travel agencies, conveyance operators and at points of entry.

WHO has provided interim guidance for novel coronaviruses

WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on Korea based on the information currently available on this event.