

Seven new suspected cases reported in B.C.

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Provincial health officials announced seven new suspected cases of SARS Thursday but said it is rare for suspected cases to develop into probable cases.

Patricia Daly, director of communicable disease control for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, said she is concerned that the public misunderstands the meaning of "suspect SARS."

"I think it is important to remember that people who fall into that category do not have SARS and in fact, of those suspect cases that we've reported from our region, all of them turned out to have other diagnoses," she said.

"We really should be looking at the probable cases, because those are the people we feel have SARS."

Several health officials are questioning the need to even keep track of the suspected cases, saying such a practice is unusual and would not be done with other diseases.

"[Suspect cases] are so nebulous," said Helen Carkner of the Fraser Health Authority.

"What the suspect means is that somebody has a sneeze."

But while some provincial authorities might like to see the term "suspect case" abolished, they must wait for Health Canada to initiate the move.

Although the World Health Organization decided recently to stop reporting suspected cases, Health Canada is still keeping track, which means British Columbia must follow suit.

Because the illness does not yet have an accurate diagnostic test, health authorities want to continue monitoring people with symptoms that could possibly be SARS related, said Tara Wilson, a public affairs officer with the health services ministry.

She added it is possible Health Canada will soon follow the WHO's example and stop reporting suspected cases.

For now though, there are 54 suspected cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome listed in B.C. and four probable cases.

Although two of the probable cases are now at home and considered by the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority to be "completely recovered," they remain counted on the list of probable cases because the lists are cumulative, Wilson said. Even if someone were to die of the illness, their case would remain listed as probable.

The two other probable cases of SARS in this province are said to be in stable to good condition, but remain in hospital.

Meanwhile, the B.C. Centre for Disease Control was in the process Thursday of contacting 250 B.C. residents who flew to Vancouver April 19 on a flight that originated in New Delhi, India and



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fit-tested with a hood
and aerosol spray.**

had a brief stop-over in Taipei, Taiwan.

Ten passengers on the China Airlines flight, all from the Abbotsford area, have since developed a fever and cough, and are now classified as having suspected cases of SARS.

After contacting the bulk of the other B.C. residents on the flight, the CDC has identified three other people with SARS-like symptoms. The three people were still being assessed and had not been classified as additional suspect cases by late Thursday.

"The [three] people identified with a fever and a cough aren't seriously ill.... They are in isolation and they are being monitored by public health," CDC spokeswoman Sally Greenwood said.

Of the 10 suspected SARS cases, two people -- an adult and a two-year-old girl -- are hospitalized in Abbotsford and Surrey, and the other eight are recovering at home. None of the patients, who come from eight different families, is seriously ill.

The CDC is acting cautiously, as the 10 people were not displaying symptoms while on the flight, so the chance of them being contagious while on the plane is slim.

"India is not considered a SARS-affected area by the World Health Organization and there was only a brief stopover in Taipei. The risk may be low that these [10] individuals have SARS, but we don't want to take any chances," the CDC's Dr. Monika Naus added Thursday.

That sentiment is echoed by several other groups and agencies, who say they are simply being extra cautious.

Vancouver-based Placer Dome Inc. announced Thursday its senior executives would not go to Toronto to attend an annual general meeting because of concerns about SARS.

Instead, the mining giant's executives, responding to an advisory by the WHO that Toronto is a destination to avoid, will attend, and participate in, the meeting by video-conference.

Placer Dome was one of a number of B.C. companies that advised their employees this week not to travel to Toronto unless it was absolutely necessary.

Although travel isn't a primary concern for the College of Dental Surgeons of B.C., it is erring on the side of caution and has sent a bulletin to all its dentists, recommending they screen patients with a series of SARS-related questions before they visit the office.

"We have recommended it is a precaution that they take," said John Henry, registrar at the College.

However, Henry said he and his colleagues are growing less concerned with the illness as they learn more about it.

"I think we were all pretty frightened, at least to begin with," he said.

"But I think everyone's getting more and more education now."

Richard Mathias, a professor of public health at the University of British Columbia, said the fear and misinformation that has been spreading about SARS reminds him of the early days of AIDS, when people used to worry they could get infected by shaking hands with someone.

"The risk communication that is being done on SARS is not terribly helpful to people at present," he said.

"What I see is a lot of information going out to the public that is not specific enough. People are uncertain who to trust [as experts on the disease], and so they are drawing their own conclusions."

He said when the WHO issued a travel warning about going to Toronto, it was reasonable for people to conclude there must be a high risk of infection in the city, even though local health

officials were insisting the situation was safe.

Mathias said he didn't want to criticize the health officials who have been struggling to contain the SARS outbreak, but he urged them to reassess the way they are getting the message out to the public.

"Let's rethink what we know, reassess how we tell that to the public -- and then be consistent with our message," he said.

Mathias said because of the conflicting views and images, fear of SARS has grown far out of proportion to the risk.

"Going to Toronto is not a risk," he said.

"Transmission in Toronto is occurring only in tight pockets and as long as you stay out of those pockets the chances of getting infected are extremely low."

Steven Taylor, a professor of psychology at UBC and an expert on health anxieties, said when an issue like SARS dominates news coverage, it feeds into the fears of those who are worried about their health.

"They hear reports on the number of deaths, and that fuels their anxieties.... They see people in masks, and they overestimate how likely it is that they'll get it."

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