

## Leptospirosis in Philippine floods

Adam Easton *Manila*

Health officials in the Philippines have warned people not to wade in floodwaters this monsoon season after three times the usual number of cases of leptospirosis have been reported.

Flash floods are common throughout the Philippine archipelago during the monsoon season, which runs from June to December. They are particularly common in Manila, the country's sprawling capital and home to 14 million Filipinos. After only minutes of a downpour, streets in low lying areas instantly become filthy rivers clogged with waste. Many Manilenos go out in the floodwaters barefoot, and children often swim in the flooded streets.

Leptospirosis is usually transmitted to humans through rats and their urine. However, bacteria in the floodwater can also infect people by entering the body through cuts and skin abrasions. Infection causes

influenza-like symptoms, with fever, myalgia, and headache. Most cases, if detected early, can be treated with antibiotics. Severe cases can lead to renal failure and, in some cases, death.

The increase in cases this year is unusual in that they occurred before the monsoon. "We are attributing this to the El Niño weather pattern. We've experienced a lot of extra rain and flooding because of this," said Dr Maria Soledad Antonio of the Department of Health's communicable disease control service.

Although the department has no nationwide figures, there have been 23 cases of leptospirosis and one death resulting from the disease at one Manila hospital so far this year. In the same period last year the hospital recorded just seven cases. Most of the cases have been among residents of poor, low lying areas. Workers in rice paddies and vendors in open air street markets are particularly at risk, according to Dr Antonio.

A lack of sanitary waste disposal and increasing rat populations have also contributed to the problem. Although no official statistics exist, rodent populations are believed to be rising. During the height of the dry conditions



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Cases of leptospirosis in the Philippines have tripled in recent floods

during the El Niño weather system, farmers in one province estimated that they were slaughtering around 800 rats a night in their rice fields. An effective rodent control programme is the best means of preventing leptospirosis, health officials have

suggested. Dr Antonio said, however, that the Department of Health does not have the budget for this. For the time being, the department has issued advice to all government health clinics warning people not to wade or swim in the floodwaters. □

## NHS must pay nursing costs for dependent nursing home residents

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The Court of Appeal in London last week overturned a High Court judge's decision which would have forced the NHS to find an extra £220m (\$352m) a year for the costs of caring for patients in nursing homes.

But the three appeal court judges ruled that the health service must pay for dependent residents needing extensive nursing care. They upheld a finding by Mr Justice Hidden that North and East Devon health authority had acted unlawfully in attempting to renege on a promise made to severely disabled residents of an NHS home that they would have a home for life there.

The appeal judges ruled that Mr Justice Hidden had been wrong to find that nursing care could never be the responsibility of local authority social services

departments. It would depend on the "nature and scale" of the nursing needed, they said. Those whose requirement for nursing care is "continuous and intense," even though they do not require inpatient care on the NHS, will be the responsibility of the health service.

The judgment only partly addresses the current anomaly whereby patients in hospitals and their own homes get nursing care free on the NHS, while in nursing homes, where care is provided by social services, patients are subject to means testing and many elderly patients have to sell their homes to pay for care.

The cost implications for the NHS are unclear. Of 157 500 people receiving long term care in nursing homes, 42 500 pay for their own care. □

## UK considers logging adverse incidents

Annabel Ferriman *parliamentary correspondent, BMJ*

The NHS needs to log all adverse clinical incidents in a systematic way, so that staff can learn from others and take steps to prevent serious disasters, the secretary of state for health, Frank Dobson, told a parliamentary committee last week.

"This is in line with the airline industry, which records not only crashes but also near misses," Mr Dobson said at a meeting of the health committee, which is looking at the adequacy and effectiveness of procedures undertaken after adverse clinical incidents.

Mr Dobson explained that there were already some systems in place to collect information about mishaps, such as the regional units for monitoring untoward incidents, but some-

thing more comprehensive was needed. Consequently, Professor Liam Donaldson, chief medical officer, had formed a panel of experts from the health service and other high risk concerns, such as the North Sea oil industry and the airline business, to consider how to identify incidents when things went wrong. It had been named the "learn from experience" panel.

"My own view is that the present system is a bit of a shambles," Mr Dobson said. "When something goes wrong, there are frequently several inquiries. At the end of many of them, neither the person complained about, nor the patient, nor the relatives are satisfied."

Mr Dobson considered that the basic concept of professional self regulation was right, provided that it is carried out properly. "If we wanted to set standards for heart transplant surgery, for example, I would rather start by involving Magdi Yacoub [a leading specialist in heart transplantation] than the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper." □