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■ MEDICINE AND HEALTH POLICY

## China culls wild animals to prevent new SARS threat

Chinese health officials ordered the slaughter of 10 000 civet cats and other mammals on Jan 5 after the country's first confirmed case of SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) since last July.

A 32-year-old freelance television reporter in the southern province of Guangdong tested positive for a new strain of the virus, prompting drastic measures by governments throughout the region to prevent the disease from spreading.

The man has been quarantined in Guangzhou since mid-December, when he developed symptoms of the disease. He is said to be recovering and no-one he has been in contact with has shown signs of infection.

But the case has alarmed officials because the source of infection remains a mystery. The only previous two confirmed SARS cases in recent weeks—in Singapore and Taiwan—were scientists who contracted the disease during laboratory research.

The origins of the SARS virus, which was first detected in Guangdong at the end of 2002, remain unclear but it is thought that human beings could have contracted the disease by eating or handling civets or other exotic animals from wildlife markets.

The new patient told doctors he had not eaten wild animals in the month before he became ill, although he had touched a rat. But Guangdong health officials said wildlife markets will be shut down and local people will be urged to destroy vermin ahead of the Chinese New Year on Jan 22, when millions of Chinese people travel back to their home towns and overseas.

"We will start a patriotic health campaign to kill rats and cockroaches in order to give every place a thorough cleaning for the Lunar New

Year", Guangdong health bureau official Feng Liuxiang told reporters.

More than 10 000 animals due to be sold in the markets will be killed, including civets, raccoon dogs, Chinese ferret badgers, hog badgers, and Eurasian badgers. Last year, tests on some of these animals revealed SARS-like viruses.

Compared with the first outbreak, when China was attacked for its slow response and bungled attempt to cover up the disease, the authorities have moved swiftly.

WHO officials in Beijing warned this week that the extermination campaign should be undertaken with caution. Jeffrey Gilbert, a WHO animal expert, said the animals must be carefully examined and disposed of so that evidence of the disease's origin is not destroyed.

Jonathan Watts

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Health officials confiscate civet cats in Guangdong province

Reuters

## Flu jab shortage in Japan puts elderly at risk

Health officials in Japan have warned that a shortage of influenza vaccine could leave millions of elderly people at risk of catching the virus, exposing them to pneumonia and other potentially fatal complications.

Hospital officials say the emergence of new influenza strains and heightened fears of an outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in east Asia have prompted a rush on vaccinations. 37 of Japan's 47 prefectures are reporting shortages of the vaccine, which does not prevent SARS or influenza, but is said to reduce the severity of the symptoms.

In 2001, the government ordered local health authorities to provide regular, subsidised influenza vaccinations to the 24 million Japanese people aged 65 years and older.

But although record numbers of people of working age and their children are paying the full price to be vaccinated, those most at risk—the elderly—are not taking up the offer of subsidised shots. Last year, only about a third of Japan's over-65s were vaccinated.

The change in the law was reportedly prompted by data from the USA—itsself in the grip of an influenza epidemic (see *Lancet* 2003; 362: 2075)—showing that vaccination could

prevent up to 80% of annual influenza-related deaths in the elderly.

After Japan was hit by an unusually high number of influenza-related deaths in early 2003, pharmaceutical firms were ordered to produce 14.8 million doses of the vaccine—a 40% increase from the previous year and enough for 30 million adults—for the current influenza season.

Yet even those stocks may not be enough. In Saitama, north of Tokyo, for example, fewer than 30 of the city's 400 medical institutions are able to offer the vaccine, according to *The Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper.

Since it takes months to produce new doses of the vaccine, the health ministry has taken the unusual step of asking drug firms to earmark some of their existing stocks for the worst-hit regions, such as Hokkaido and Yamagata in the north.

Although fewer influenza cases have been reported this season than at the same point last year, the number is expected to rise over the next 2 months as spells of cold, dry weather give the virus its perfect breeding ground.

Justin McCurry