

Deadly Flu Strain Shipped Worldwide

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Officials Race to Destroy Samples

By Rob Stein and Shankar Vedantam

Washington Post Staff Writers

A dangerous strain of the flu virus that caused a worldwide pandemic in 1957

was sent to thousands of laboratories in the United States and around the world, triggering a frantic effort to destroy the samples to prevent an outbreak, health officials revealed yesterday.

Because the virus is easily transmitted from person to person and many people have no immunity to it, the discovery has raised alarm that it could cause another deadly pandemic if a laboratory worker became infected, officials said.

As a result, health authorities were urgently working to make sure all samples are destroyed and to closely monitor anyone who may have come into contact with the virus for signs of illness, officials said.

"This virus could cause a pandemic," said Klaus Stohr, the World Health Organization's top flu expert. "We are talking about a fully transmissible human influenza virus to which the majority of the population has no immunity. We are concerned."

Although no infections have been reported, and the chances of infection are probably low, the potential consequences are so grave that urgent steps

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were
necessary, he said.

"If a laboratory accident were to occur, a person could become infected. If that happened, that person would likely fall ill and he or she could infect somebody else. And that could mark the beginning of a global outbreak," Stohr said.

WHO is working with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and other national health agencies to contain the situation, he said, adding that "the level of concern about this virus is very high."

The virus, known as an H2N2 strain, killed 1 million to 4 million people worldwide in 1957 and 1958, including about 70,000 in the United States. Because the virus has not circulated in the wild since 1968, anyone born after that would have no natural immunity to it. Since then, the virus has been kept only in high–security biological laboratories.

The problem arose when a private company, Meridian Bioscience Inc. of Cincinnati, sent a panel of virus samples to about 3,700 laboratories, some in doctors' offices, to be tested as part of routine quality–control certification conducted by the College of American Pathologists. An additional 2,750 laboratories, all in the United States, received the samples as part of other certification processes and were asked to destroy them, CDC spokesman Dan Rutz said.

The panel samples usually include only strains of the flu virus that are relatively benign, Stohr said. "We would consider this an unwise and unfortunate decision," he said.

The 3,700 samples were sent out beginning last fall, primarily to labs in the United States, although 14 were in Canada and 61 were in 16 other countries, Stohr said.

"The people who are handling this are extremely experienced in dealing with potentially dangerous pathogens, and we have no reason to believe that there were any breaches," Rutz said. "But there's always a concern about a

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virus

to which a sizable part of the population has no immunity, and we're interested in seeing to it that it's neutralized as quickly as possible."

The mistake came to light March 25 when the National Microbiology Laboratory in Winnipeg, Manitoba, identified the virus. "They were doing this routine testing and identified this virus and said, 'This shouldn't be here,' " Rutz said. Canadian officials notified WHO and the CDC on Friday.

"We have requested that additional measures be taken -- that the laboratories have to acknowledge receipt of the message in written form, to confirm that they have destroyed any of these samples, and that they would monitor their laboratory staff for any respiratory disease," Stohr said.

Robert G. Webster, a flu expert at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, called the incident "a terrible, terrible mistake."

"I have been telling WHO for a number of years that this is a dangerous virus that is still out there in more labs than they know," he said.

"This may alert WHO and Homeland Security and whoever wants to know that each and every H2N2 sample from 1957 needs to be rounded up and locked down."

Neither the College of American Pathologists nor Meridian Bioscience was aware that the virus being shipped was the deadly 1957 strain, said Jared Schwartz, a pathologist and spokesman for the college. The college asked the company to ship a Type A strain of virus, he said, and Meridian's paperwork indicated that this strain was benign.

"For reasons I don't understand and Meridian doesn't understand, the documentation they had was incorrect," he said, adding that the source of the mislabeling was unclear.

Meridian may have obtained the strain from another company that had misidentified it, he said. Even had Meridian known it was the deadly H2N2 strain, Schwartz said, current federal guidelines would have allowed

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the company to ship it. He said that neither the college nor the company was aware CDC was considering whether to reclassify the strain as too deadly to ship.

Schwartz said a mechanism is being established to require anyone shipping pathogens to notify the CDC about what strains of virus are involved.

William J. Motto, chairman and chief executive of Meridian Bioscience, said he had no comment last night.

Staff writer David Brown and research editor Lucy Shackelford contributed to this report

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