

Rare African virus coming to Texas

By Mandi Vest
THE BATTALION

A new virus could be on its way to Texas. West Nile encephalitis, a virus that affects birds, horses and humans and can be fatal, is expected to hit this area soon. Veterinarians are watching for signs of its arrival. This fatal bird disease originated in Uganda along the West Nile. Evidence points to New York's John F. Kennedy Airport as the point of entry for the virus to the United States, said Dr. Ian Tizard, professor of exotic bird health and immunology at Texas A&M's

College of Veterinary Medicine. The discovery was made when 70 birds at a zoo in the Bronx were found dead. A New York lab first suspected the culprit to be St. Louis encephalitis but later found the virus to be a West Nile strain.

Tizard said the virus is spread by mosquitoes and usually affects larger birds, especially crows and related species. But it can be spread to horses and humans. The only humans who have been adversely affected by the virus were more than 70 years old. Only nine people were killed in the New York and New Jersey areas by the

disease. But many people were studied and showed signs of infection without symptoms.

West Nile has been found along the Eastern coast in Maine, Michigan, Florida and Louisiana. Tizard said it is making its way along the Gulf Coast. The virus spreads along water sources where mosquitoes thrive. The recent findings in Louisiana are what have Texas veterinarians on alert. East Texas and along the Gulf Coast are prime targets for West Nile, he said.

Birds have been the most hit by West Nile, and Tizard said that should be the focus of concern. "My

concern is what it will do to the wild bird population," he said. If several dead birds are found in an area, it could be that West Nile has arrived. It is not likely though that this virus could wipe out the bird population on A&M's campus, Tizard said, because the disease is not spread from bird to bird. Officials suggest contacting the Texas Department of Health or the Texas Animal Health Commission if something suspicious is found.

Tizard said the disease can be fatal to horses and possibly other animals. The Vet School is stocked with the West Nile vaccine for horses if the problem arises.

AIDS vaccine monkey dies

(AP) - In a study that illustrates how cunning a foe AIDS is, a monkey that was given an experimental AIDS vaccine died after the virus changed just one of its genes.

HIV, which causes AIDS, already is known to mutate and grow impervious to standard AIDS drugs in at least half of all Americans being treated for the infection.

Now researchers have seen a similar outcome with an experimental vaccine that tries to stop the virus from multiplying. The mutation occurred in one of eight vaccinated rhesus monkeys in a Harvard experiment.

The findings were published in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature.

Scientists who reviewed the results described the monkey's death as "more disappointing than surprising."

It does not mean that AIDS vaccines are doomed to fail, they said, but illustrates how the virus will not be easily defeated or even contained anytime soon.

"It is sobering to find that a single-point mutation within the virus can initiate a cascade of events resulting in a clinical vaccine failure and death," said Dan H. Barouch, a clinical fellow at Harvard Medical School and lead author of the study.

More than one dozen experimental vaccines using different genetic strategies have been tested in various laboratories. Some have been successful for more than two years.

Unlike a flu shot, AIDS vaccines do not actually prevent infection by the invading virus. That is because HIV comes in many strains and changes rapidly.

Instead, the AIDS vaccines work to hold HIV infection in check. The vaccines are made with genes that carry the code for proteins in the virus. When the immune system sees these codes, it learns to stimulate production of virus-fighting cells known as killer T cells.

Preemies show better behavior

(AP) - Very small premature babies born in the late 1970s turned out less intelligent than other youngsters their age, a study found. But to researchers' surprise, they got into less trouble as teens, perhaps because they had dotting parents.

As expected, the preemies in the study had learning difficulties and persistent neurological problems while growing up. But they also reported significantly less risky behavior as young adults than a comparison group.

Differences between the groups were found when it came to the use of alcohol, marijuana and other illegal drugs; conviction of a crime or other contact with police; and, for girls, having sex and getting pregnant by age 20.

"That was totally unexpected, because there's a lot of literature that criminality is related to lower IQ," said Dr. Maureen Hack, who led the study as director of the neonatal follow-up program at Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital in Cleveland. She said the researchers thought the preemies would have had more behavior problems.

She said one possible explanation is that the preemies' parents saw their children as particularly precious and watched over them more.

Dr. Henry Shapiro, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics' section on

developmental pediatrics, said there is no evidence that the hypothesis is correct. But he said the study could help policymakers better plan for the medical and educational needs of premature babies.

Infants of very low birth weight, 3.3 pounds or less, account for 1 percent of all U.S. births, or about 40,000 babies per year.

The babies in the study were born at 29 weeks and just over 2 1/2 pounds on average.

They were born between 1977 and 1979, before neonatal intensive care units and specialized technology were widely used to keep tiny preemies alive. Today, lung treatments, breathing machines, intravenous feeding and other technology enable some preemies as small as a pound to survive, though with significant disabilities.

Hack said her findings would probably apply to many of today's premature infants.

Past research on premature babies found higher rates of learning disabilities such as attention deficit disorder and of neurological problems such as cerebral palsy, blindness and deafness.

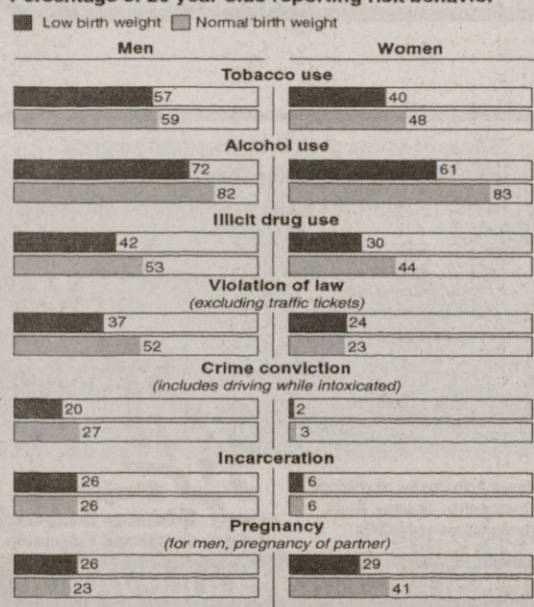
Earlier studies generally followed children until school age. This study followed the preemies until age 20 and examined their physical growth, behavior and mental health as well as intelligence.



The research was reported in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine.

Preemies fare well as teen-agers

A study found that babies born prematurely were less likely to engage in risky behavior during adolescence than their counterparts of normal birth weight. The preemies, all born from 1977 through 1979, had more learning and neurological problems but fewer behavioral problems overall.

Percentage of 20 year olds reporting risk behavior



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