

Doctors: Number of U.S. SARS cases could be stabilizing

By Laura Meckler
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — The number of people infected by the mysterious flu-like illness dubbed SARS is beginning to stabilize, giving health officials hope that the disease may be coming under control, a top Bush administration official said Monday.

The numbers continue to creep up for severe acute respiratory syndrome. Worldwide, more than 2,300 people have been sickened, and the death toll hit 100 on Monday. There are now 148 U.S. cases in 30 states with no deaths.

"I think we've started to stabilize in the number of cases. We're not seeing these large jumps every day," said Jerry Hauer, acting assistant secretary for public health preparedness at the Department of Health and Human Services. "We're hoping that this lack of a rapid growth is a true indicator that maybe it's slacking off a bit."

In an interview with The Associated Press, Hauer added that it's too early to declare victory. "We don't know yet whether ... we're through act one of a two-act play or whether we're just four lines into a three-act play."

With China a hotbed for new respiratory bugs, Hauer said, U.S. officials are working to install health officials in China who could monitor events year round.

He said that officials expect to distribute a test within a week that can definitively diagnose the new virus. That would allow laboratories around the nation to easily settle whether a patient is truly infected with SARS, or is sick with a more common bug.

And he said officials are baffled as to why U.S. patients are less sick than those in Canada, where SARS has forced thousands of people in Toronto to be quarantined and has killed 10.

"It might be that some of these folks in Canada just got more of the virus, were in closer contact," he said. "Any theory I

give you at this point in time would just be a theory."

Testifying before a congressional committee, top health officials cautioned that things may get worse.

"This has very quickly become an international epidemic," Dr. Julie Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. "We don't know where this is going to go. We have to be prepared for this to continue to spread."

Officials believe the virus originated in Guangdong, a southern province of China, where respiratory illnesses often start and spread. Chinese officials kept news of the disease secret for months, allowing SARS to spread before international health authorities could begin to fight it.

Hauer hopes that will change if international experts are stationed there permanently.

"If you've got people on the ground, you have a much better

sense as to what's going on," he said. "I'm optimistic at this point that we will have some kind of presence after this is all over."

Just Monday, Chinese government officials reported that the disease had spread farther than they initially reported. State television reported one SARS death each in the provinces of Shanxi in the north, Sichuan in the west and Hunan in central China — the first reported fatalities in those areas and an indication the disease was more widespread than previously acknowledged.

He said the international health authorities to be stationed in China could come from the CDC or from the CDC working with the World Health Organization.

Each year, the U.S. government watches China closely in an effort to predict what strain of flu is likely to spread around the globe. That's partly because China is ahead of the United States in its respiratory season, partly because China has a large

SARS cases continue to rise worldwide

While still rising, the number of people infected with severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS, is beginning to stabilize giving health officials hope that the outbreak may be coming under control. About 100 people have died and over 2,300 are believed to be sick.

Number of reported SARS cases



SOURCES: World Health Organization; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

population living in dense quarters, and partly because people there have close contact with certain animals, such as pigs and chickens, that can spread flu and other diseases to people.

Experts suspect that's how SARS originated.

In China on Monday, the World Health Organization's

medical experts continued to investigate possible animal connections to the virus. Experts have linked SARS to a new form of coronavirus, which causes the common cold and produces other strains in animals. The WHO experts have found any evidence yet to support an animal link.

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