

Experts worried about spread of MERS



By Leslie Morgan, OBE
CEO, Durbin PLC

Leslie Morgan is a Fellow of the Royal
Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain

Perusing the pages of the *Financial Times* on my computer tablet recently, I read with interest that Saudi Arabia has replaced its health minister amid concerns about the spread of the coronavirus, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS CoV), throughout and beyond the Gulf.

First detected in Saudi Arabia in September 2012, MERS can cause symptoms such as fever, breathing problems, pneumonia and kidney failure, and is from the same family as the SARS virus which killed around 800 people worldwide. Whilst it has not spread as fast as SARS it has been more deadly, and at the time of writing 92 of the 238 people confirmed to have been infected with MERS have died. Concerns that it is being passed between humans has reportedly seen some medical staff express fears about their own increased chances of catching the disease if they treat victims. This in turn has prompted the Saudi government to warn staff that they will be suspended if they refuse to carry out their duties. Figures nonetheless show that over 20 health-

care workers have already been infected in Saudi Arabia and the UAE in recent weeks, and furthermore King Fahd Hospital in Jeddah was forced to close its emergency department recently prior to a thorough clean after an infected health-care worker died.

Whilst initially it was thought there was no scientific evidence to justify ordering preventative measures such as travel restrictions, virus experts have warned that they are now becoming increasingly concerned about the pace at which the disease is spreading and that it may be becoming difficult to contain. Cases have already been reported in the UK, USA, Germany, Italy, France and Tunisia, and with the death of a Malaysian man who returned home from a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia and another passenger who travelled on a flight from Abu Dhabi to Manila being diagnosed, the disease has now also reached Asia.

The jump in Saudi cases is of course of particular concern because of the expected influx of pilgrims from around the world during Ramadan in July, followed by the arrival of millions more to perform the annual Haj in Mecca and Medina in early October.

So what can be done to contain the outbreak? Firstly we must consider the source of the problem. Research has linked the virus to a camel infection, although it is not yet known exactly how the infection transfers between camels and humans. Screening camels for infection and then quarantining them is certainly one option, and avoiding their noses and mouths is of particular importance as studies have shown that the greatest amount of the virus is contained in these areas. The World Health Organisation is also warning against close contact with camels when visiting farms or barn areas

where the virus is known to be circulating. Medical staff of course need to be particularly vigilant in looking out for possible MERS cases and to follow containment procedures rigorously when it is identified. Saudi butcher shops and restaurants have also reported a decline in the sale of camel meat and milk after the acting health minister advised against consumption as a further preventative measure. Other tips include wearing masks to Haj, washing hands regularly, particularly after coughing or sneezing, and heating unpasteurised milk to 70°C before drinking.

As there is as yet no known cure for MERS, the Saudi Health Ministry has said that a major international pharmaceutical company would soon be visiting the kingdom to explore the possibility of manufacturing a vaccine for the virus. It's certainly a comfort to know that the medical scientists whose work saves lives daily may in time be able to come up with something that helps contain the disease, but until then everyone has a part to play in being as hygienic as possible so as to help keep the spread of this deadly virus in check. **MER**

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