Rift Valley fever in Madagascar

Until it was introduced into Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 2000, Rift Valley fever (RVF) tended to be confined to Sub-Saharan Africa.

The disease has recently occurred in Madagascar. Rift Valley fever is a viral disease mainly affecting ruminants but is also transmissible to humans. Rift Valley fever is transmitted to animals by the bite of a mosquito carrying the virus.

Most human infections are caused by direct or indirect contact with the blood or organs of infected animals.

Although there is no evidence of person-to-person transmission, humans can also be infected by mosquito bites.

Owing to its mode of transmission, RVF usually occurs after unusually heavy rainfall or flooding, when conditions are conducive for the vector to multiply in the larval stage.

Although the majority of infected people present no symptoms, some develop an influenza-like syndrome, with muscular pain, headaches, joint pain, vomiting, loss of appetite, and sensitivity to light.

In the severest cases, infected people suffer ocular lesions, neurological problems and haemorrhagic fever.

As of 15 July 2008, at least 20 people in Madagascar have reportedly died as a result of RVF infection, and the disease has claimed the lives of thousands of animals since the beginning of this year.

In April 2008, a joint mission by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) visited Madagascar to advise on the measures to be taken.

However, as control of the infection, notably at its animal source, is costly and the expected funding has not been forthcoming, the proposed response plans could prove impossible to implement.

The response plans provide for RVF control in livestock and the infected human population and improved reporting and laboratory diagnostic systems. It is also planned to raise public awareness in Madagascar concerning the existence of this epizootic/epidemic and to train the government officials responsible for RVF control.

It is only to be hoped that the necessary funds will be made available.

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