

Health

Ebola trial vaccine

Birth deformities probe in France sheds no light

PARIS, July 13, (RTRS): An investigation into why a dozen or so babies born without hands or arms in a handful of rural areas of France since 2000 has so far been unable to determine causes, an interim report published by the Health Ministry showed on Friday.

The babies with limb defects were born in the rural Ain region of eastern France, near the Swiss border, as well in the regions of Morbihan and Loire-Atlantique in western France.

Media reports of the births have raised alarm among the French public that they might be caused by some kind of toxin in food, water or air, or that pesticides might be responsible.

Answers

But the long-awaited interim report by Sante Publique France, an agency of the Health Ministry, offered no relief to families looking for answers.

The expert panel concluded that there was no evidence of a "cluster" of cases in the Ain region, where it said there were six cases. It said there was a cluster in Morbihan, which it said involved three babies.

Additional investigations are to be carried out in nearby Loire-Atlantique. It gave no figures for that area, but media reported several cases there.

In the 265-page document, experts said it was impossible to draw definitive conclusions and that possible environmental factors would be assessed at a later stage.

"Scientific studies screening, questionnaires and local environment testing have been conducted by Sante Publique France which has not identified an obvious cause," the report read.

A second report is expected by the end of the year.

Epidemiologist Emmanuelle Amar, who first revealed the birth defects in Ain, told Reuters last year the only thing mothers of the affected babies had in common was that they lived in cereal-growing areas amid fields of corn and sunflower.

"We do not have answers to our questions," Samuel Bernard, father of a daughter born in 2013 with a missing left arm in Morbihan told France Info radio, adding he and other families were asking for an independent investigation to take place.

Hospital registries show limb defects occur in 1.7 of every 10,000 births, or about 150 cases per year in France. Birth defects can have multiple causes, including chromosome disorders, drug use or exposure to toxic substances.

But authorities only have six registries covering around 20% of France's population to produce the figures, making a nationwide investigation difficult.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, about 10,000 babies worldwide were born with malformed or missing limbs after their mothers received the drug thalidomide to treat morning sickness.

Ebola: Congo will not permit the use of further experimental vaccines as it combats an Ebola outbreak because doing so risked

"confusing the population," the government said on Friday.

Health workers have vaccinated more than 130,000 people during the nearly year-long epidemic in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo with an experimental vaccine manufactured by Merck that has proven highly effective.

But the outbreak, which is the second worst in history, continues to spread, due largely to mistrust by people in eastern Congo of the response and armed attacks against health workers that have limited access to patients.

"Due to a lack of sufficient scientific evidence on the efficacy and safety of other vaccines, and the risk of confusing the population, it was decided that no clinical trial of vaccines will be authorised during the current Ebola outbreak," the health ministry said in a daily bulletin.

But the government did not rule out using other vaccines in the future, "once their efficacy has been proven," a government directive to health workers said on Wednesday.

In May experts advising the World Health Organization recommended that other vaccines be introduced to help ensure that vaccine supplies last and specifically mentioned a new experimental vaccine manufactured by Johnson & Johnson.

"There are legitimate concerns that the stock of the Merck vaccine is not sufficient to sustain any increased flow of supply for more than a few months, and there is unfortunately no guarantee that this epidemic will be controlled by then," Natalie Roberts, Medecins Sans Frontieres' operations manager, told Reuters.

The Congolese government said there were currently no issues with the supply of the Merck vaccine.

Misinformation propagated by some community leaders in eastern Congo has led people to refuse vaccinations or treatment, and the government fears using a second vaccine would stoke further conspiracy theories.

More than 2,400 cases confirmed and probable cases have been registered since the outbreak was declared last August, including over 1,600 deaths.

Syphilis: Syphilis cases have soared in Europe over the last decade and become, for the first time since the early 2000s, more common in some countries than new cases of HIV, health experts said on Friday.

Reported cases of the sexually transmitted disease are up by 70% since 2010, a report from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) showed - with the rise driven by more unprotected sex and riskier sexual behaviour among gay men.

"The increases in syphilis infections that we see across Europe ... are a result of several factors, such as people having sex without condoms and multiple sexual partners, combined with a reduced fear of acquiring HIV," said Andrew Amato-Gauci, an ECDC expert on sexually trans-



In this July 2 photo, Brent Steffensen, a hemp extractor at the processing facility Wasatch Extraction, uses a machine to extract fats, waxes and lipids from a raw hemp plant that are not used in CBD oil. Industrial hemp, a non-psychoactive cousin of marijuana, was legalized in Utah last year. (AP)

More than 7 to 8 hours sleep may be harmful

Early risers at lower breast cancer risk

Loss of productivity, healthcare costs

More breastfeeding could save \$1bn per day

KUALA LUMPUR, July 13, (RTRS): Not enough breastfeeding costs the global economy almost \$1 billion each day due to lost productivity and healthcare costs, researchers said on Friday, as health experts urged more support for nursing mothers.

A new website developed by researchers in Canada and Asia showed that the world could have saved \$341 billion each year if mothers breastfed their children for longer, helping prevent early deaths and various diseases.

Known as the "Cost of Not Breastfeeding", the online tool used data from a six-year study supported by the US-based maternal and child nutrition initiative, Alive & Thrive. "It is a human right, it saves lives and improves the prosperity of economies," Canada-based health economics expert Dylan Walters said about the importance of breastfeeding.

But women shouldn't rush to reset their alarm clocks to lower their breast cancer risk, Richmond said.

"Our main findings were based on women's reported morning or evening preference, rather than actually whether they get up earlier or later in the day," Richmond noted.

Another drawback is that participants were all of European ancestry, and results might differ for women from other racial and ethnic groups.

Most women who get breast cancer develop these tumors after age 50, and they may be more prone to these tumors with a family history, certain genetic mutations, dense breast tissue, early puberty or late menopause, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Walters, who led the study of more than 100 countries, said the website was the first of its kind and aimed to help policymakers to measure economic losses in individual countries when they do not support breastfeeding.

The United Nations' World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that babies be breastfed exclusively at least their first six months, then have a diet of breast milk and other food until they are two years old.

Breastfeeding can help prevent diarrhea and pneumonia, two major causes of infant death, and protect mothers against ovarian and breast cancer, according to the UN agency.

But only 40% of infants under six months are exclusively breastfed globally, while 820,000 child deaths could be avoided each year if the recommendation is followed, it said.

Obstacles to breastfeeding range from a lack of facilities and break

times at places of work, aggressive marketing of baby formula, and harassment or stigma if women nurse in public.

Ahead of the World Breastfeeding Week from Aug 1, researchers said they hoped more nations would now implement policies promoting breastfeeding, push employers to provide more support, and clamp down on baby-formula marketing.

"Economic evidence resonates well with policymakers. Not investing in breastfeeding has a cost," Alive & Thrive's Southeast Asia director Roger Mathisen told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Hanoi.

"This tool is really making the argument that it is a good investment to expand policies such as paid maternity leave," he said, adding that it would help keep women in the workforce and boost the country's economy.

whether women's preferred early or late wake-up time (conformed) with their work hours, said Dr Eva Scherhammer, author of an accompanying editorial and a researcher at the Medical University of Vienna and Harvard Medical School in Boston. Being an early riser might make women's wake up time better match a typical 9 to 5 workday that is common for many jobs.

"The majority of women are neither morning or evening types, but somewhere in between on that spectrum, hence, any potential risks are likely to affect a relatively small proportion of women," Scherhammer said by email. "However, sleep and work timing might be more important than previously thought."

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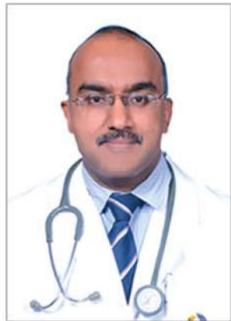
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