

Health

HIV vaccine fails test

Some hospitals wary as new liver 'transplant' rules begin

WASHINGTON, Feb 4, (AP): Long-delayed rules that will more broadly share scarce donated livers go into effect Tuesday, to the dismay of some hospitals in Tennessee, Kansas and other states that fear their patients may lose out.

Where you live makes a difference in how sick you have to be to get an organ transplant, and wealthier patients sometimes travel to other states to get on shorter waiting lists. The new rules are an attempt to ease that geographic disparity by giving the sickest patients first chance at a donated liver even if it has to be flown about 500 miles to reach them.

The aim is to make the wait for livers, and eventually all organs, less dependent on your ZIP code. The United Network for Organ Sharing, or UNOS, which runs the nation's transplant system, says the policy will save lives.

"We're hopeful this can make it more equal and help everybody who's waiting," said Dr Julie Heimbach, a Mayo Clinic transplant surgeon and past chair of UNOS' liver committee.

Under the new policy, patients near death within 500 nautical miles (575 miles) of a donor hospital will be offered a matching liver first. If there are no takers, it will be offered next to progressively less sick patients at different distances within that circle.

The flip side: Patients that aren't as sick living in areas where there are more organ donors, such as parts of the South and Midwest, likely will wait longer as livers once used locally are shipped to urban centers where the shortage is more severe.

Alarming

"This is very alarming," said Billie Cole of Knoxville, Tennessee, whose husband Bruce is on the liver waiting list at Vanderbilt University Medical Center.

A lawsuit filed by about a dozen hospitals in the South and Midwest forced the new rules to be put on hold last spring just nine days after they began. Last month, US District Judge Amy Totenberg called the case "difficult and wrenching" but issued a ruling clearing the way for the new rules to begin again.

More than 12,700 people are on the waiting list for a new liver. Just 8,372 received transplants from a deceased donor last year. On average, three people die every day waiting.

For years, organs from the dead have been offered first to the sickest patients in the same general area as the donation, even if someone sicker outside the local boundary is a good match. The problem: Some parts of the country have fewer available organs and higher demand for them than others. Someone in California or New York, among the toughest places to get a new liver, tends to be sicker before getting a transplant than someone in Kansas.

Partly that's because of geographic differences in how people die. More troubling, some places do a better job of recruiting would-be donors. An Associated Press analysis recently found some of the groups that collect organs at death secure donors at half the rate of others, missed opportunities that

could have saved lives.

"Instead of fixing their donation rates, what they have done is try to change the law and get organs from the South," said Vanderbilt's Dr. Seth Karp. "This will penalize areas that have really good donation rates," and risk wasting livers amid all the long-distance shipping, he added.

UNOS has pledged to monitor if the new liver rules have the intended effect, and modify them if needed. But changing how organs are distributed "does not create more donors," Heimbach noted. "That's the thing that needs to happen to help more people."

Also:

NEW YORK: The latest attempt at an HIV vaccine has failed, as researchers announced Monday they have stopped giving the experimental shots in a major study.

The study had enrolled more than 5,400 people since 2016 in South Africa, a country with one of the world's highest HIV rates. Last month, monitors checked how the study was going and found 129 HIV infections had occurred among the vaccine recipients compared with 123 among those given a dummy shot, according to the US National Institutes of Health.

"An HIV vaccine is essential to end the global pandemic and we hoped this vaccine candidate would work. Regrettably, it does not," said NIH infectious diseases chief Dr Anthony Fauci.

There were no safety concerns, but NIH, which sponsored the study, agreed that vaccinations should stop.

The experimental shot was based on the only vaccine ever shown to offer even modest protection against HIV, one that was deemed 31% effective in Thailand. That wasn't good enough for real-world use but gave scientists a starting point. They beefed up the shot and adapted it to the HIV subtype that's common in southern Africa.

Two other large studies, in several countries, are under way testing a different approach to a possible HIV vaccine.

OAKLAND, California: Walgreens will pay \$7.5 million to settle with California authorities after an employee was criminally charged with impersonating a pharmacist and illegally filling more than 745,000 prescriptions in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Kim Thien Le has pleaded not guilty to felony impersonation charges. Prosecutors said that from late 2006 through 2017, Le used the license numbers of registered pharmacists in order to impersonate them and dispense prescriptions at Walgreens stores in Santa Clara and Alameda counties.

The prescriptions allegedly included more than 100,000 for opioids such as fentanyl, morphine and codeine.

Le herself didn't have a pharmacist license, prosecutors said.

The district attorneys in both counties filed a consumer protection action against Walgreens. Prosecutors on Monday announced that the pharmacy giant agreed to settle.



In this Sept 13, 2011 file photo, Columbia University Medical Center Transplant Services surgeons watch a monitor as they perform a liver transplant at New York-Presbyterian Hospital in New York. Long-delayed rules that will more broadly share scarce donated livers go into effect, Feb 4. The aim is to make the wait for livers, and eventually all organs, less dependent on your ZIP code. (AP)

China virus death toll rises to 425, total cases now 20,438

Hong Kong reports first virus death

Japan quarantines 3,700 on cruise ship

N. Korea making 'all-out efforts' to guard against virus

BEIJING, Feb 4, (AP): Hong Kong hospitals cut services as medical workers were striking for a second day Tuesday to demand the border with mainland China be shut completely to ward off a virus that caused its first death in the semi-autonomous territory.

All but two of Hong Kong's land and sea crossings with the mainland were closed at midnight after more than 2,000 hospital workers went on strike Monday. As many as 9,000 medical workers could join the bigger walkout Tuesday to demand closure of the border across which tens of thousands of people continue to travel daily.

Hong Kong's Hospital Authority said it was cutting back services because "a large number of staff members are absent from duty" and "emergency services in public hospitals have been affected."

Hong Kong was hit hard by SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, in 2002-03, an illness from the same virus family as the current outbreak. Trust in Chinese authorities has plummeted following months of anti-government protests in the Asian financial hub.

Also Tuesday, the leader of the nearby gambling enclave of Macao asked the city's casino bosses to suspend operations to prevent further infections after a worker at one of resorts tested positive for the virus. Macao has recorded 10 cases in all.

Confirmed

The mainland's latest figures of 425 deaths and 20,438 confirmed infections of the new coronavirus were up from 361 deaths and 17,205 cases the previous day. Outside mainland China, at least 180 cases have been confirmed, including two fatalities, in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

The patient who died in Hong Kong was a 39-year-old man who had traveled to Wuhan, the mainland city that has been the epicenter of the outbreak, before being hospitalized. The Hospital Authority said Tuesday he had existing health conditions but did

not give details. Most cases of the illness have been mild, but most who died have been older people with other ailments such as diabetes or heart disease.

China has struggled to maintain supplies of masks to filter out the virus, along with protective suits and other key articles, as it seeks to enforce temperature checks at homes, offices, shops and restaurants, require masks be worn in public and keep more than 50 million people from leaving home in Wuhan and neighboring cities.

Authorities were redoubling border inspections and conducting screenings and medical surveillance on those who return from overseas business trips, the North's main Rodong Sinmun newspaper said.

It said the 30,000 workers are examining and monitoring residents and trying to inform North Korean people about how dangerous the virus is, how it spreads and what precautionary steps they should take.

North Korea shares a long, porous border with China, its last major diplomatic ally and aid benefactor. Tens of thousands of North Korean workers were believed to be working in China before a UN order for Beijing to send them back

home expired in December. It was unknown how many of them have returned home.

The newspaper said research centers and pharmaceutical factories were working to develop and produce drugs, test kits, disinfectants and other medical supplies and government ministries were prioritizing quarantine efforts.

North Korea has also banned foreign tourists, reduced flights and suspended operations at a liaison office it has jointly run with South Korea located just north of the inter-Korean border. South Korea on Tuesday reported its 16th case of the virus.

North Korea took similar tough quarantine measures during the 2002-03 spread of SARS, which also began in China. North Korea didn't report any SARS case there, according to the South Korean government.

Meanwhile, Japanese officials began quarantining a cruise ship carrying 3,700 passengers and crew Tuesday after a Hong Kong passenger was diagnosed with the new coronavirus virus.

Quarantine officers entered the 'Diamond Princess' cruise ship, which

arrived the port of Yokohama near Tokyo on Monday evening, to check the health of all 2,700 passengers and 1,000 crew members, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said. The move comes as the 80-year-old man who disembarked in his home city on January 25 tested positive for the deadly virus on Saturday. The Hong Kong man flew to Tokyo on January 17 and boarded the vessel at Yokohama on January 20, according to the ministry.

Japan has 20 confirmed coronavirus cases, of these 17 people have been in Wuhan, the central Chinese city where the deadly outbreak originated. Since Saturday, the government has denied entry to foreigners who have been in China's Hubei Province, where Wuhan is located, over the last 14 days as well as holders of Chinese passports issued in Hubei. A total of eight foreigners have been barred from entering Japan, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a press conference on Monday.

South Korea on Tuesday confirmed its 16th case of novel coronavirus infection, with the latest patient having recently visited Thailand, Yonhap News Agency reported.

To help meet demand, the European Union office in Beijing said member states have shipped 12 tons of protective equipment to China, with more on the way.

Late Monday, China's President Xi Jinping presided over a special meeting of the top Communist Party body for the second time since the crisis started, saying "we have launched a people's war of prevention of the epidemic." Xi threatened punishments for those who neglect their duties will be punished, state broadcaster CCTV reported.

Other countries are continuing

evacuations and restricting the entry of Chinese or people who have recently traveled in the country. A plane carrying Malaysians from Wuhan arrived in Kuala Lumpur and the 133 people on board were to be screened and quarantined for 14 days, the maximum incubation period for the virus.

Taiwan on Monday flew home 247 of its citizens from Wuhan and had sent three passengers for treatment after they were found to have fever or sore throats. The other passengers are being quarantined at medical facilities for the next two weeks.

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