



By: TA | AP Insight

Why is Russia not disclosing any further information about plague-related concerns?



A top official with the World Health Organization said Wednesday the U.N. health agency doesn't know how a lab worker in Siberia died amid concerns about plague, and she urged Russia to provide more information.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO director of Epidemic and Pandemic Management, said the agency doesn't know what the "causative agent" was behind the woman's Oct. 2 death, and "this is why we need more information."

In its tersely worded statements, Russia's public health watchdog, Rospotrebnadzor, does not link the case to pneumonic plague, saying only that "extensive" testing found no evidence the lab worker's illness was caused by any of the pathogens she worked with at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Research Institute of Siberia and the Far East.

Russia has said she died of pneumonia -- a "typical" acute respiratory viral infection -- and its health authorities have found no cases of plague recently, WHO has said, acknowledging that pneumonia is commonplace.

"We don't understand how she was infected," Van Kerkhove said.

The comments suggested the U.N. health agency has more questions than answers about the situation at the lab, which focuses on plague and was founded about a century ago to study the disease in a region where it is endemic.

The incident has been surrounded by secrecy

Since the suspicious death of the lab worker, Russian authorities have kept a tight lid on information about it.

The incident has been surrounded by secrecy and claims that it could have been caused by pneumonic plague.

While the case has raised global concerns,

Russian state TV and other national state-controlled media have steered clear of the subject. Some state-sponsored news outlets withdrew earlier reports about the case.

Rospotrebnadzor said Sunday the lab worker was diagnosed with "pneumonia of unknown etiology," meaning its origin was not known.

A state TV station in Irkutsk reported she died Oct. 2 in a hospital in Shelekhov, a town just outside Irkutsk.

Moscow informed the WHO that no case of plague has been registered in the Irkutsk region in southeastern Siberia

Officials have quarantined a hospital and are monitoring the contacts of the worker, who died of what unconfirmed media reports said could have been pneumonic plague -- a less common but severe form of plague that can spread from person to person.

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President **Donald Trump** said Tuesday he would speak about the issue "very soon" with Russian President Vladimir Putin and report about it "probably tomorrow." Wednesday is the Kremlin leader's 74th birthday.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that a Putin-Trump call hasn't been set yet but could be organized quickly.

Trump said the U.S. stands ready to help Russia. Asked what the U.S. intelligence community was saying about the case, Trump said the U.S. is in "very deep discussions" on the topic.

Russia is prodded for more information

In response to WHO requests, Russia declared

that no case of plague had recently been registered in the Irkutsk region, the U.N. organization said.

Russian health authorities reported a full range of preventive measures had been carried out — including tracing the dead woman's contacts, medical monitoring and lab tests, the WHO said.

The WHO has requested further information to clarify the cause of the severe pneumonia

The Russian note relayed to The Associated Press by the WHO said the test showed “no presence of dangerous infectious disease pathogens in any of the contacts.”

The Geneva-based organization said it has requested further information to clarify the cause of the severe pneumonia, the pathogen that prompted the public health measures, and media reports that a second employee had pneumonia of undetermined cause.

The Kremlin and other officials stay tight-lipped

Peskov referred all questions to Rospotrebnadzor, which does not mention suspected plague in its reports.

In its latest statement Tuesday, the agency said “the sanitary and epidemiological situation in the Irkutsk region, the cities of Irkutsk and Shelekhov is calm.”

Authorities were completing a “complex of prophylactic measures and medical observation over contacts,” it said, adding that so far they have found two cases of COVID-19 and two cases of rhinovirus.

“No other infectious pathogens have been found among contacts,” it said.

Distrust of Russia's official narrative is natural and almost inevitable - Vasily Vlassov

Judy Twigg, professor of political science at Virginia Commonwealth University, noted that while the measures taken by Russian health authorities “have been swift and serious,” officials sought to play down the situation and “any statements that strayed from that party line ... were edited or deleted within hours.”

“What we are watching is less a failure to respond than a failure of candor,” Twigg said in written comments.

Vasily Vlassov, professor at the department of healthcare administration and economics at Russia's Higher School of Economics, said the measures taken appeared “sensible,” focusing on treating the sick, isolating them and their contacts, looking for new cases and carrying out final disinfection.

But he said it wasn't clear whether more transparency was possible if those dealing with the situation didn't have enough certainty, and “maybe, they still don't.” Deceiving the public “always turns out to be harmful,” he added, and distrust of Russia's official narrative is “natural” and “almost inevitable.”

In the Soviet era, crises with dangerous outbreaks of infection had “a thick veil of secrecy — people were told nothing.”

The lab worker who died was described as highly diligent

The news outlet Lyudi Baikala — or “People of Baikala” — identified the dead lab worker as Darya Shipilova, 28, and said she first was hospitalized with cold symptoms Sept. 29 and died three days later.

It quoted colleagues as saying she was a highly qualified and diligent researcher. They also emphasized that security rules at the facility

are extremely strict.

The report quoted Shipilova's neighbors as saying a team of disinfection experts did several cleanups of her apartment, leaving a strong antiseptic smell.

Shipilova's mother, who worked as a doctor in the past, described her daughter as hard-working and dedicated, according to independent Russian news outlet Glubina, adding that she had not gotten official documents describing the cause of death.



The incubation period for pneumonic plague — the disease's most virulent form — can be as short as 24 hours
- WHO

Irkutsk Gov. Igor Kobzev said she died of a “particularly dangerous infection” and everyone who came into contact with her has remained under medical supervision.

The hospital where she died was under quarantine, no longer admitting or discharging patients, although its outpatient clinic has continued operating, according to Mayor Maxim Modin.

Twigg noted that Russia has criminalized “false information” about threats to public safety in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, “so silence is the one safe move for everyone below the top.”

“Personalist regimes without electoral accountability tend to treat bad news as a loyalty problem rather than focusing on the actual problem to be addressed,” she said.

She warned that “a government that is not

believed when it says ‘there is no outbreak’ will not be believed when it must actually say ‘there is one; do the following.’ We saw this with COVID.”

Pneumonic plague and the more well-known bubonic plague — also called the “Black Death” — are caused by the same bacteria, said Simon Clarke of the University of Reading in the U.K.

Pneumonic plague results from breathing in the bacteria, causing an infection in the lungs.

Bubonic plague is spread by flea bites from rodents carrying the bacteria called *Yersinia pestis*. It had not been eliminated, but it's not spread very easily and it is treatable with antibiotics.

“People think the plague is gone. It was something that occurred 500 years ago, and it's not. It's here amongst us,” Clarke said. “Unless you get rid of those wild animals, which of course is not possible, then you're not going to get rid of the bacteria. It's just something that is with us.”

The incubation period for pneumonic plague — the disease's most virulent form — can be as short as 24 hours, the WHO said.

The lung-based illness is a less common but severe form of plague that can spread between people via respiratory particles. If untreated, the illness can be fatal, but recovery rates are high if detected and treated in time, it said.