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Scientists fear sisters may have caught bird flu from brother

CHRISTINA PANTIN

TWO Vietnamese sisters have died from bird flu, possibly after contracting the deadly virus from their brother in the epidemic's first recorded human-to-human transmissions, the United Nations' health agency said yesterday

The deaths brought to ten the number of people known to have died after the virus, which has led to the destruction of millions of birds across Asia, made the leap to humans.

Scientists believed, and health officials hoped, that the disease could only be contracted through exposure to infected birds or droppings, and not from person to person.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said it could not be entirely sure how the Vietnamese sisters contracted the disease, because their brother had died earlier of respiratory ailments before any tests could be conducted on him.

"The source of the two sisters' infection has not yet been conclusively identified, but investigations have failed to reveal a specific event, such as contact with sick poultry, or an environmental source to explain the cases," said Bob Dietz, a WHO spokesman in Hanoi.

"Limited human-to-human transmission from the brother to his sisters is one possible explanation," he said.

No other cases of people catching the virus from other people have been suspected anywhere else. With the disease taking a foothold in ten Asian nations, China's state television yesterday reported five more areas with suspected cases of bird flu in the world's most populous country.

Authorities shut down poultry processing factories in the eight affected regions as workers stepped up culls and vaccinations.

The Vietnamese sisters, aged 23 and 30, died on 23 January, the WHO said. Hanoi's National Institute for Hygiene and Epidemiology said last week it was certain bird flu was the cause of death.

But the WHO waited for tests at a laboratory in Hong Kong to confirm the results.

Six other people have died from bird flu in Vietnam.



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The disease has killed two boys in Thailand, and two other Vietnamese have been confirmed as having the virus but have either recovered or are still in hospital.

The WHO said it saw no evidence of "efficient" transmission of the H5N1 strain of the bird flu virus between people "in Vietnam or elsewhere".

Human transmission is not unprecedented. The WHO noted that in the 1997 Hong Kong outbreak, there were cases of "limited" human-to-human infection, but said it never "developed into a significant public health threat".

Vietnam has banned the transport of poultry across the entire country.

Web links

- [Dept of Health - pandemic flu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en)
<http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/PandemicFlu/fs/en>
- [WHO - Bird Flu fact sheet](http://www.who.int/csr/don/2004_01_15/en/)
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