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MINNESOTANS MAY FEEL THE BITE OF A MILD WINTER

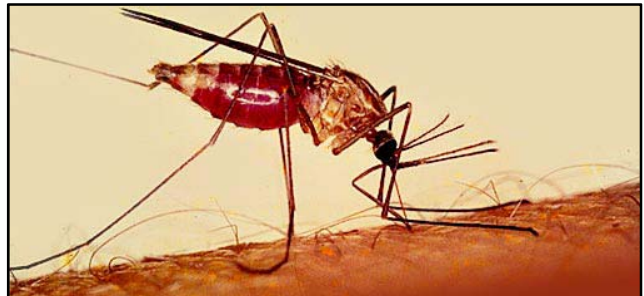
Record mosquito population leads to outbreak of rare disease

Officials are warning that a rare mosquito-borne virus has re-emerged in the Midwest following this year's mild winter. The virus causes severe swelling of the brain, resulting in death in about one third of cases. Historically, the virus has been limited to the Eastern US and human cases were rare.

Until now. Aided by a mild winter, a record number of mosquitoes have proliferated across the country, allowing the virus to spread nationwide. Outbreaks have already been recorded in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, with a death toll surpassing 30,000 nationally. Cases have not yet been reported in the twin cities and best estimates indicate that there is an 80% chance that the cities will be spared.

However, based on the experience of other urban centers, the health department warns that if an outbreak does occur in the twin cities, 2% of residents will likely become infected.

Standard mosquito control measures have proven ineffective; given the high death toll due to these outbreaks, the USDA has lifted ban on a more potent insecticidal spray. "These chemicals are very effective at killing mosquitoes," says environmentalist Ahn Chu. "Problem is, they also aren't all that bad at killing people." Chu refers to the 0.1% death rate observed in populations following use of the spray and the reason for its prior prohibition. Critics are also quick to point out that the insecticidal spray is not 100%



effective and 0.3% of the population would still likely become infected in the event of an outbreak.

The decision of how to respond has sparked an intense debate across the metro. Environmental groups opposing the spraying are accusing officials of over-reacting, while officials are arguing that the public does not appreciate the seriousness of the situation.

Amid the debate there is a third, quieter voice. The soft-spoken Dr. Ana Pheles, a researcher at the U of M, has recently developed a rapid test for the virus. If a large enough sample of mosquitoes could be tested, Dr. Pheles believes that she could predict with certainty

whether or not an outbreak would occur in the sampled region.

While certainty is appealing, officials warn that conducting the test for the twin cities metro area would delay any action by a week. If an outbreak were to occur, the delay would still allow 1% of the population to become infected before spread of the virus could be halted.

"I just hope they make a decision, *any* decision, soon," says long-time twin cities resident Doug Carlsen. City officials couldn't be reached for comment. It is rumored that they have locked themselves in a U of M classroom until they reach a consensus on the issue.