

WHO presented with signatures from 126 countries for action on encephalitis

World Encephalitis Day, February 22, 2020

Almost 28,000 people from 126 countries including 2,000 Australians have signed a petition to the World Health Organization (WHO) to increase awareness of encephalitis, the life-threatening neurological condition that kills up to 30 per cent of those affected.¹

President of the Encephalitis Society, Professor Tom Solomon and Chief Executive, Dr Ava Easton, presented the petition to members of WHO to mark World Encephalitis Day, February 22, 2020, and to increase global dialogue on finding a solution to the illness.

“While the world is gripped with fear over the new coronavirus, COVID-19, we see encephalitis patients daily with permanent brain injury and a legacy of disabilities,” Dr Easton said.

“Not only is the mortality rate estimated to be up to 12 times higher* but encephalitis has a far more serious lifelong impact than COVID-19.”²

“As more and more people continue to travel to areas where viral encephalitis is endemic, the need to provide fully informed choice to travellers is paramount,” said Dr Easton.

Around 500,000 people are affected by encephalitis annually,³ however, research conducted by the Society shows 78 per cent of people worldwide do not know what encephalitis is.⁴

This is compounded by the challenges faced by the medical community with the disparity between likelihood and severity.

The WHO along with the Australian Department of Health, recommend vaccination to prevent encephalitis caused by endemic viruses. However, according to Dr Easton there is often criticism among medical professionals to adopting wider vaccination use.

“Encephalitis-causing viruses are endemic in major destination hubs for Australian travellers.

“What’s important to note is that although the risk of infection may be low, the consequences may be severe.

“We urge the medical community to provide travellers with informed choices and to discuss consequences of infection along with likelihood.

“The WHO can guide discussion, to help prevent deaths, improve the lives of survivors, and assist in managing this global issue which has a human solution,” said Dr Easton.

Infectious encephalitis is typically caused by influenza viruses, measles virus, herpes simplex virus and enteroviruses⁵ with mosquito-borne Japanese encephalitis virus, West Nile virus and tick-borne viruses the most frequently identified endemic causes of the disease,^{6,7,8} More rarely, encephalitis can also be caused by bacteria, fungi and parasites.⁵

While coronavirus can also theoretically cause encephalitis there have been no reported cases during the current outbreak, with previous cases of coronavirus encephalitis having predominantly occurred in patients with existing immune deficiencies.⁹

MORE

*The Encephalitis Society has produced this figure based on current fatality rates of COVID-19.

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The Encephalitis Society estimates 3.75 million people have died from encephalitis in the last 25 years.**

Long-term effects of the illness include cognitive, physical or emotional difficulties including impaired memory, language problems, changes in decision making, planning and organisation, personality changes, anxiety, depression, mood swings, fatigue, weakness and epilepsy.

While the severity and symptoms of encephalitis can vary, they include influenza-like illness, headache, drowsiness, uncharacteristic behaviour, inability to speak or control movement and seizures.⁵

Dr Easton says, clothing, repellent and vaccination recommendations should be discussed with at-risk travellers along with potential prevention measures.

The petition, 'Show the World Health Organization that Encephalitis Matters' was presented in Geneva with 27,796 signatures.

More information on Encephalitis Society, their work and Australian health professional participation is available at www.worldencephalitisday.org.

Encephalitis Society, is a global encephalitis support, awareness and research charity whose World Encephalitis Day campaign has reached more than 150 million people worldwide since its launch in 2014.

**The Encephalitis Society has produced this figure based on an average of 500,000 cases per year, of whom up to 30% will die dependent on the cause.

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