

ROSS RIVER AND BARMAH FOREST VIRUSES, SOUTH WEST

1418. Mr B.K. Masters to the Minister for Health

- (1) With reference to the letter dated 21 March 2003 from Michael Jackson, Executive Director, Population Health, to Bret Belbin representing Allen Bentley, Ludlow River Estate, how many cases of Ross River and Barmah Forest virus disease have been reported in Western Australia for each of the past five years?
- (2) Of these, how many cases involved people who were known to have visited or to have lived in the Ludlow area?
- (3) What signage or other advice is provided to people who visit Crown land (beaches, nature reserves, national parks and state forests) in places such as the south west where Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses are endemic, where mosquitoes are common and where these viruses occur in a relatively high proportion of these mosquitoes?
- (4) How many legal actions have been commenced against the Health Department by people who contracted one of these viruses when visiting an area of Crown land in the south west or elsewhere, claiming that the department and/or the State Government has been negligent in not controlling mosquito numbers or in not providing reasonable levels of signage warning of the higher risk of virus infection by visitors and residents?
- (5) If none, why has the caravan park proposed by Mr Bentley been delayed or stopped on the basis of an earlier letter from the Health Department to the Shire of Capel suggesting that the Shire should be aware of its potential legal liability from persons who may sue should they contract Ross River or Barmah Forest virus as a result of staying at the proposed caravan park?
- (6) What legal or other advice has the Development in Mosquito-Borne Disease Risk Areas (DIMBDRA) working group received to suggest that such legal action is possible and, if such advice has been received, will the Minister table a copy of it?
- (7) Is this not a case of bureaucracy being unreasonably over-cautious such that, taking the DIMBDRA concerns to their logical extent, no future development will ever be approved or supported by the Health Department if there is an above average risk of a person living or visiting the development being infected by the Ross River or Barmah Forest virus?

Mr R.C. KUCERA replied:

1. The number of doctor-notified cases of Ross River virus (RRV) and Barmah Forest virus (BFV) diseases in WA in the last 5 years are:  
1998-99: 423 cases of RRV and 24 cases of BFV.  
1999-00: 955 cases of RRV and 31 cases of BFV.  
2000-01: 137 cases of RRV and 38 cases of BFV.  
2001-02: 58 cases of RRV and 22 cases of BFV.  
2002-03: 81 cases of RRV and 22 cases of BFV.
2. The number of doctor-notified cases with a place of residence or likely history of exposure in the Ludlow region of the Shire of Capel (includes Ludlow, Ruabon, Stratham, Peppermint Grove and Forrest Beaches) in the last 5 years are:  
1998-99: 1 case of RRV and no cases of BFV.  
1999-00: 24 cases of RRV and 1 case of BFV.  
2000-01: No cases of RRV and no cases of BFV.  
2001-02: No cases of RRV and no cases of BFV.  
2002-03: No cases of RRV and no cases of BFV.
3. The Departments of Conservation and Land Management and Health provide signs warning of the risk of Ross River virus, including advice about avoiding biting mosquitoes on the Leschenault Peninsula (another focus of Ross River virus activity).  
  
Department of Health pamphlets on Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses are available at Local Government offices and some tourist bureaux in the South-west.  
  
Media alerts warning of an increased risk of these diseases are issued in years in which elevated levels of activity of the viruses are detected by the Department of Health's surveillance program.
4. No record of any legal action has been found.

5. The Department of Health is unable to comment on any decision made by the Shire of Capel and/or Mr Bentley.
6. Legal advice given on any topic is the subject of legal professional privilege and if such advice was received, it would not be tabled.
7. The Department of Health considers the individual circumstances of each proposed development brought to the attention of the Department with a view to determining whether the relevant local government, planning authority or developer should be advised of the need to warn the public to the risk of Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses and the need for effective mosquito management programs. From a public health perspective, the Department does not support development in those areas identified by the Department of Health to be high risk areas for Ross River and Barmah Forest viruses and where options for mosquito control are limited.