

Canecutter's disease on the rise among travellers

University of Queensland research has shown 'canecutter's' disease is a growing problem for travellers.

PhD researcher Dr Colleen Lau from the School of Population Health said the disease, known medically as leptospirosis, was traditionally a concern for males working in the agricultural and livestock industries, as it is contracted from contact with the urine of host animals.

Ms Lau said recreational exposure and international travel have emerged as increasingly important sources of infection over the past decade.

"Many of the areas with a high incidence of leptospirosis are popular destinations for domestic and international travellers," Colleen said.

"With the increasing popularity of eco-tourism and outdoor adventure activities, travellers are likely to become increasingly exposed through activities that involve contact with freshwater, soil and animals."

Leptospirosis causes influenza-like symptoms such as fever, chills, headache and jaundice but can lead to more serious illness including kidney failure, liver failure, lung haemorrhage, brain infections, and can occasionally be fatal.

Called canecutter's disease in Queensland due to the spread of the disease by canefield rats, the study, published in the journal *Travel Medicine and Infectious Dis-*

ease, has opened up a new way of looking at the spread of the disease.

As an under-diagnosed cause of fever in adventure seekers and returned travellers, Colleen and her co-authors, Professor Phil Weinstein and Lee Smythe, urged clinicians to change their perceptions of the population at risk of contracting leptospirosis, even if they do not fit the mould of a male agricultural worker.

"Early recognition, diagnosis, and treatment will reduce the incidence of severe illness and deaths," she said.

Known high-risk areas for leptospirosis include tropical and subtropical regions such as Queensland, New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, parts of South East Asia and the Caribbean.

Colleen is working in one such island,

American Samoa, to complete her PhD on an analysis of risk factors for contracting leptospirosis.

For more information contact Dr Colleen Lau and Professor Philip Weinstein (+61 7 3365 5065) or Jeann Wong from the School of Population Health (+61 7 3365 5446).

SEM image sourced from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services. ■

WHAT ARE LEPTOSPIRES

Leptospire are long, thin motile spirochetes that may be free-living or associated with animal hosts and survive well in fresh water, soil, and mud in tropical areas.

Organisms are antigenically complex, with over 200 known pathogenic serologic variants. Molecular taxonomic studies at CDC and elsewhere have identified 13 named and four unnamed species of pathogenic leptospire. Leptospirosis causes a wide range of symptoms, and some infected persons may have no symptoms at all.

Symptoms of leptospirosis include high fever, severe headache, chills, muscle aches, and vomiting, and may include jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), red eyes, abdominal pain, diarrhea, or a rash.



A canefield rat (*Rattus sordidus*).
(PHOTO: Dr Luke Leung University of Queensland)



This scanning electron micrograph (SEM) depicts a number of *Leptospira* sp. Bacteria.

Australian Hand Cane Cutting Championships

The Annual Australian Hand Cane Cutting Championships will be held this year on Sunday, June 27, Donnelly's farm, Dalbeg, with heats underway at 10am.

Heats are broken into age groups with Under 35 years, 35 to 55 years and over 55 years, with the eight best cutters vying for the title of Australian Hand Cane Cutting Champion.

Other events throughout the day include tug-of-war, cut top and load relay (done the old fashioned way) and celebrity event.

There's free entertainment for the kids – face painting, jumping castle, balloon art and giro rides, live music all day and food and drinks available on site. It will be a great day of family fun.

If you'd like to try your hand at cane cutting as done in days gone by, give the Donnelly's a call on 07 4784 0147 – they're always looking for more competitors. Nominations close Wednesday, June 23.