

## Hepatitis E and cholera outbreak in Kathmandu

**T**he incidence of infective diarrhea and hepatitis E has sharply increased in Kathmandu, Nepal, said doctors at a recent press conference organized by Liver Foundation Nepal.

This summer, the Epidemiology and Disease Control Division (EDCD) of Nepal received notification of 55 cases of cholera from the capital alone. In addition, this is the fourth outbreak of hepatitis E in recent years in Kathmandu, and the largest so far.

Dr. Santosh Man Shrestha, president of Liver Foundation Nepal said, "Recurrence of liver disease in a particular area is rare in other parts of the world but this is the fourth Hepatitis E outbreak in Kathmandu Valley."

Hepatitis E and diarrheal diseases are an important public health concern in Nepal. Diarrheal diseases are the second largest killer of children here; 10 million children suffer from diarrheal disease every year and about 28 000 of them die.

"We suspect drinking water as the source of contamination behind these outbreaks but we have not received any official report of drinking water tests from the Nepal Water Supply Corporation, which has the responsibility of testing water quality," said Dr. Manas Kumar Banerjee, EDCD director.

The water supply infrastructure of

Kathmandu Valley is very old. There are many leakages, and the drinking water is easily contaminated by the sewage and other substances from the sanitation pipes.

"Besides lack of safe drinking water, feeding children without first washing hands properly, using dirty utensils to carry water, eating dirty and stale food are other causes behind an increase in these infectious diseases," says Banerjee.

EDCD has recently incorporated diarrheal diseases in its priority and has increased its surveillance. In addition, the Nepal Water Supply Corporation has started chlorinating drinking water.

"Disinfecting water certainly helps contain outbreaks on a short term. But only through provision of pure water and increase in the awareness level of people about the importance of good hygiene can future outbreak of these diseases be stopped," says Banerjee. — Dr. Sharan Prakash Sharma, Kathmandu, Nepal

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.061166

## Schwarzenegger vetoes single-payer bill

**C**alifornia Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has promised to veto a government-financed single-payer universal health insurance bill passed by the state legislature claiming "socialized medicine is not the solution to our state's health care problems." He emphasized that such a measure would "cost the state billions and lead to significant new taxes ... without solving the critical issue of affordability."

Bill SB 840, written by Democratic State Senator Sheila Kuehl, was supported by various health access coalitions and labour groups but was seen by many political analysts and media commentators as a political ploy by the Democrat-controlled legislature to paint the governor into an "anti-health" position in run-up to the November elections.

The bill would have replaced the network of public and private insurance programs that currently cover the great majority of Californians with a state-financed and administered health

system. Except for federally funded Medicare (for the elderly) and Medicaid (for the poor), most health insurance in California, as throughout the US, is funded by employer plans. SB 840 would have covered medical, dental, vision, hospital services and prescription drugs, and would have been funded through payroll and individual income taxes and premiums. Currently, approximately 6 million Californians are uninsured for health care.

In explaining his veto, Schwarzenegger said he "must veto" the bill "because I cannot support a government-run health care system."

"I won't jeopardize the economy of our state for such a purpose," he added in a statement.

Kuehl countered that, "Where there are no cost controls at all now, and enormous administrative overhead and profit for insurance companies, there would have been a transparent system that actually would succeed in making health care coverage affordable in California."

Leading the condemnation of Schwarzenegger's veto, Deborah Burger, president of the California Nurses Association, said the governor was "abandoning millions of Californians to health insecurity and potential financial ruin from un-payable medical bills."

Critics of SB 840 say that the bill itself was fatally flawed because it did not include cost projections or information about who would pay and what premiums would be required.

Another sign of the bill's weakness was that although it was passed handily by the Democratic-controlled State legislature (Schwarzenegger is a Republican), it was not supported by Phil Angelides, the Democratic candidate for governor in the November election. Though Angelides says he favours some form of universal health insurance, he has not backed the current version.

According to a recent Public Policy Institute of California poll, the veto is not likely to seriously hurt the incumbent in November. Less than 4% of respondents to a statewide poll cited health insurance coverage as the main issue in the November election. — Milan Korcok, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.061200



Art Explosion

Aging water supply infrastructure is a public health concern in Kathmandu.