

Medical Bulletin

Welcome to the second South East Public Health Unit (SEPHU) Quarterly Medical Bulletin for 2024

It's been a busy few months for the communicable diseases team at SEPHU. Significantly, there has been a re-emergence of locally acquired mpox with a number of cases in the SEPHU catchment. In addition, we continue to see measles and hepatitis A in people returning from overseas.

In this issue we look at travel related illness and what you might think about when people present as unwell when returning from overseas. We also provide an update on the current mpox outbreak in Victoria.

Finally, SEPHU is continuing to work closely with our community doctors to support culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Below you will find information on how you can get involved in our Cultural Liaison Officer pilot project.

Mpox outbreak

In our last newsletter, we highlighted a single locally acquired mpox case in January this year. Since April 2024, there have been seven mpox cases in the SEPHU catchment with five acquiring the infection in Victoria. All cases were males, with history of sexual contact with males. Cases include individuals who were not previously vaccinated, partially vaccinated and fully vaccinated (with two doses).

[Health alerts](#) have been issued by the Department of Health, and a coordinated response is currently underway with public messaging including the promotion of the mpox vaccine.

A list of mpox vaccine providers within the catchment can be found on the [SEPHU website](#). If your practice offers mpox vaccination, we encourage you to actively follow up those who may be due their second dose.

An important note on the clinical presentation of mpox. The clinical presentation may be mistaken for other virus induced rashes such as herpes and varicella. The mpox rash appears in stages – macules, papules, vesicles and pustules. Lesions dip in the centre before crusting over. Systemic symptoms may present prior to rash onset and can include fever, muscle aches and a sore throat. Some patients may also present with proctitis, with or without anal lesions. The severity of clinical symptoms may vary depending on the vaccination status of individuals.

Testing for mpox is best performed with a swab of rash lesion material (fluid or base of lesion) which is then sent for PCR. For patients with proctitis, an anorectal swab is recommended. Samples should be marked as “urgent” and sent to the Victorian Infectious Diseases Reference Laboratory (VIDRL) via your routine pathology provider. Approval from the Department of Health is not required for mpox testing.

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Mpox is an urgent notifiable condition under the *Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008* and requires notification both by medical practitioners and pathology services. Notifications are to be made by telephone to the relevant local public health unit on **1300 651 160** (24 hours a day) upon clinical suspicion or initial diagnosis (presumptive or confirmed).

Travel related illnesses

Since travel restrictions ended following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in outbreaks of communicable diseases overseas. With this, we have seen a resurgence of travel related illnesses locally. SEPHU has seen a rise in notifications of conditions related to travel including hepatitis A, dengue and measles. We also continue to manage cases of measles and typhoid/paratyphoid related to recent travel.

In addition to cases we regularly see here at SEPHU, there has been a re-emergence of rabies in Timor-Leste and increasing concerns about avian influenza after the first Australian case was recently reported in a returned traveler.

Many travel related conditions can be prevented through vaccination and taking the appropriate measures to reduce exposure. Health related advice specific to travel destinations can be found on the [Smarttraveller](#) website.

Patients should be reminded to be up to date with routine immunisation and be made aware of additional vaccines that may prevent or reduce severity of illness such as hepatitis A, typhoid and rabies. The Department of Health have recently issued a [Health Alert](#) providing advice on immunisations for travel.

General advice about reducing exposure to insect-borne diseases should also be provided, especially if travelling to countries where conditions such as dengue, chikungunya and zika virus are endemic or when there are outbreaks occurring.

Acute rheumatic fever and rheumatic heart disease – notification reminder

Acute rheumatic fever (ARF) and rheumatic heart disease (RHD) were made routine notifiable conditions for medical practitioners on 31 July 2023. Under the *Public Health and Wellbeing ACT 2008*, notification should be made within five days of diagnosis.

Since August 2023, SEPHU has been notified of three ARF and ten RHD cases, with the most recent notification made in October 2023.

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Please continue to notify any cases using the online [smartform](#). SEPHU will then contact the notifying practitioner to obtain further information on demographic characteristics, clinical manifestation and diagnosis, as well as information on secondary prophylaxis.

Enhanced data will assist with understanding the local epidemiology of both conditions in Victoria, to ensure that cases have been referred to appropriate clinical care and to contribute to national surveillance.

Are you a GP or a nurse practitioner who is keen to help Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities in improving their access to care?

The South East Public Health Unit (SEPHU) is running a pilot project to connect people who have recently arrived in Australia with a GP practice that can provide clinical management of Hepatitis B and C. Optimising links into care is crucial towards eliminating viral hepatitis.

A SEPHU Cultural Liaison Officer is now supporting new migrants and refugees with Hepatitis B and C to negotiate the health system and prevent patients falling through the gaps. We are seeking GPs and nurse practitioners who want to help.

If your practice volunteers, you would see up to 5 patients in a year (more likely to be Hepatitis B than C) depending on language spoken and location. You would be asked:

- To provide clinical care and management for people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds with viral hepatitis B and C and their contacts who are at risk of infection, for example the Hepatitis B vaccination of household contacts; and
- To provide guidance to access other appropriate healthcare services thus helping to navigate the health system.

We hope this project will develop collaborative partnerships that tackle health disparities in our local communities. If you wish to participate in supporting the management of hepatitis B and/or C in CALD communities, managing notified conditions in general in CALD communities or require further information, please contact SEPHU.Trace@monashhealth.org

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Active Living

One of the four population health priorities within SEPHU's Catchment Plan is the promotion of active living to prevent chronic disease and improve overall health and wellbeing. According to data from the Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, only 54% of Victorians currently meet recommended physical activity guidelines. Within the 11 local government areas that make up SEPHU's catchment population, seven are below the state average for meeting physical activity guidelines.

The population health team at SEPHU are advancing this priority area with the establishment of a Regional Expert Advisory Group comprising of individuals from local councils, community organisations, health services and other agencies to support work on this important topic.

SEPHU's current strategies take a multi-pronged approach to tackling this issue and include:

1. strengthening individual capacity and knowledge to be better connected and engaged, socially and physically within the community for life;
2. modifying the physical and social lived-environment for individuals to address barriers and enablers to active lifestyles;
3. leveraging the power of coordinated, transparent and collective work to improve and amplify the work of stakeholders; and
4. using research and data to establish new and evolve existing evidence-based standards for effective and sustainable interventions fostering active lifestyles.

For more information regarding SEPHU's population health priorities, please visit our website:

<https://sephu.org/population-health/>

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Frequently asked questions

What diseases does SEPHU manage?

SEPHU now manages all notifiable communicable diseases with the exception of tuberculosis, which is managed by the Victorian Tuberculosis Program based at the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Does SEPHU have a strategic plan?

SEPHU is in the final stages of developing a strategic plan for the next 5 years. The final round of community consultation took place last month and the plan is expected to be finalised in the coming months. Once finished you will be able to see the SEPHU Strategic Plan on our website.

How is SEPHU different to the Department of Health?

SEPHU, like other local public health units, has been established to provide place-based management of priority public health concerns in south-east Metropolitan Melbourne. Through strong connections with the local community, SEPHU is able to engage closely with priority populations and ensure that the public health response is targeted to those most in need.

The follow-up of communicable diseases by the SEPHU team is similar to that previously conducted by the Department of Health; however, there is capacity to provide enhanced follow-up across many more conditions. A good example is our work to improve access to care for people diagnosed with viral hepatitis.

Can I call SEPHU directly for advice or to notify a communicable disease?

Urgent notifiable conditions should be called through to the central telephone number – 1300 651 160. Where appropriate, these calls will be forwarded directly to SEPHU. Routine notifiable conditions should be notified online at: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/infectious-diseases/notifiable-infectious-diseases-conditions-and-micro-organisms>. We are always happy to provide advice and assist where possible. Please email us at SEPHU.trace@monashhealth.org This inbox is monitored during normal business hours.

Does SEPHU have a webpage with information on communicable diseases similar to the Department of Health?

The SEPHU webpage has recently been update – <https://sephu.org/>. Please jump on to find out more about the work we are doing and for information on how to notify communicable diseases.