

UK medics fight deadly measles outbreak in Samoa

UK medics will help save lives in Samoa where a fatal outbreak of measles is affecting thousands of people.

The group of 13 British doctors and nurses left the UK for the Pacific island today (Friday, 29 November) to help children who are suffering.

The support from the UK-aid funded UK's Emergency Medical Team (UK EMT) follows an urgent request for British expertise from the Samoan government and the Australian Medical Assistance Team (AusMAT), who have spent the last two weeks tackling the outbreak.

Over 2,900 people in Samoa have so far been infected, and 39 people, including 35 children under four have died. A further 250 new cases were recorded in the last 24 hours.

Measles is a highly contagious virus that can spread to others through coughing and sneezing.

Each case can infect many other people and complications can lead to pneumonia, severe diarrhoea and encephalitis or inflammation of the brain.

The UK medics will focus on helping patients recover from these complications.

Over the past few years, childhood immunisation rates including measles has dropped significantly in Samoa, making the country highly vulnerable to outbreaks. The majority of measles cases diagnosed in Samoa have been children and 90% of all deaths so far are of children under the age of five.

International Development Secretary Alok Sharma said:

This deadly measles outbreak is having a devastating impact on the people of Samoa, particularly children, who urgently need our help.

The UK is stepping up to do all we can to prevent the further loss of life.

The UK team's work to treat Samoan children is part of a wider international push by UK aid to stop premature deaths, including through vaccinating against preventable diseases.

DFID supports various organisations that work to strengthen global health including the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and Gavi, an international vaccine alliance, who are hosting a replenishment summit in the UK next year.

The UK team flew out from Manchester Airport today and are expected to arrive in Samoa on Sunday, where they will embed with AusMAT, initially for two weeks.

Their work will begin in the main hospital in Samoa's capital Apia on Monday morning.

UK-Med CEO David Wightwick said:

Our mission is that people affected by disease outbreaks, conflict or natural disasters around the world receive the best quality emergency healthcare.

Alongside our partners Humanity & Inclusion we're pleased to be able to support our AUSMAT and Samoan healthcare colleagues who have been working tirelessly to save lives and alleviate suffering.

We're grateful that our team of dedicated clinicians are able to provide expert and specialist care to those affected by the measles outbreak in Samoa with funding from UK Aid from the British people.

Notes to editors:

- There is a wider ongoing vaccination programme led by the Samoan government. Measles can spread rapidly in areas with low vaccination rates, such as Samoa.
- The UK's Emergency Medical Team (UK EMT) is a collaboration between DFID, charity UK-Med (which holds a register of NHS volunteers ready to send to emergencies), charity Humanity & Inclusion UK, the Palladium Group, an advisory group, and the UK Fire and Rescue Service.
- The UK medics who have received training by the charity UK-Med.
- A specialist physiotherapist, trained by the charity Humanity & Inclusion, will also join the team.
- The UK EMT has deployed around the world, including in December 2017 responding to a diphtheria outbreak in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
- While the doctors and nurses are away from home, UK aid will pay for their roles to be backfilled, so there is no additional pressure on the NHS. DFID will cover all their associated costs.
- The cost for this support will come from DFID's existing humanitarian

budget for emergency deployments.

- The UK is providing central funding to the WHO and UNICEF, which are working on the wider response to the measles outbreak in the region.
- The Government of Samoa declared a state of emergency on 17 November, closing schools, prohibiting large public gatherings and making immunisations compulsory.
- The WHO issued a global call for specialist Emergency Medical Team help on 26 November.
- Samoa is eligible for aid or Official Development Assistance (ODA) and is a member of the Commonwealth.