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HEALTH BUSINESS - BRIEFING

Published: June 19, 2007 at 9:22 AM

Flu virus 'in the money,' say researchers

TORONTO, June 19 (UPI) -- Influenza virus remains viable on paper money for as long as 17 days, researchers said at a conference in Canada Tuesday.

"We know that the virus we cultured from the currency can is still strong enough to infect other cells after more than two weeks," said Yves Thomas, a biologist/virologist at University Hospitals of Geneva, Switzerland.

"What we don't know yet," he told United Press International, "is whether that virus on the currency could be transferred to the skin of a person and cause disease in humans."

In a study presented at the Options for the Control of Influenza VI conference in Toronto, Thomas said that Swiss bankers, in planning for measures in a pandemic, wondered if their currency could be a transmitter of disease.

Thomas and colleagues performed a series of studies that found common types of influenza strains -- including Wisconsin influenza A 2005, Moscow A 1991 and Hong Kong B 2001 -- could survive on banknotes for anywhere from two hours to 72 hours.

When that virus was mixed with mucus and sprayed onto the currency, the virus remained viable for up to 17 days, Thomas said. Think of someone infected with influenza, sneezing or coughing while holding a fist full of dollars, he suggested.

"Maybe we need some people to go into money laundering," he joked.

More seriously, he said, "Contamination of environmental surfaces such as banknotes need to be considered as a potential vector for influenza in case of a pandemic."

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