

## HOSPITAL, HEPATITIS C OUTBREAK VICTIMS REACH LEGAL SETTLEMENT

**BISMARCK:** Trinity Health and its hospital in Minot have agreed in principal on a legal settlement with 21 victims of the largest hepatitis C outbreak in recent US history, though Trinity's legal fight with a nursing home where most people were sickened will continue. Trinity attorneys filed a request asking state Judge Todd Cresap to dismiss the lawsuit, saying Trinity recently reached a confidential settlement resolving the plaintiffs' claims. They asked Cresap to allow a connected legal dispute between the hospital and the former ManorCare nursing home to be resolved in federal court, where it originated. Cresap has not yet ruled.

Behdad Sadeghi, an attorney for the plaintiffs,

told The Associated Press that the settlement still needs to be finalized, but that his side told the court an agreement had been reached in principle. He declined to comment further. Hepatitis C is a viral infection that can cause serious liver damage or death. Fifty-two people were sickened in the outbreak that began in August 2013, including 48 residents or former residents of ManorCare. It was the nation's largest outbreak in 13 years, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Victims began suing in federal court in April 2014, seeking unspecified money damages. Last March, 21 victims and the nursing home joined in a separate lawsuit in state court alleging that an employee of

Trinity's outpatient laboratory service reused needles and didn't follow infection control practices, causing the outbreak. State and federal health officials suspect the outbreak might have been associated with blood services provided to ManorCare residents, though they never pinpointed an exact cause.

Trinity has rejected the notion that it's responsible and asked Cresap to dismiss the lawsuit earlier this year. Attorney Randall Hanson did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday on why the hospital decided to settle. The victims sought compensation for expensive drugs used to treat the disease and unspecified damages for economic harm, personal injury and the wrongful death

of at least three people.

ManorCare alleges that Trinity fraudulently blamed the nursing home for the outbreak, hurting its business and leading to the sale of the nursing home to a Wisconsin-based partnership last year at a price far below its true value. Trinity disputes that. Trinity, which operates medical facilities in 10 northern North Dakota cities, maintains in court documents that its battle with ManorCare is best suited for federal court, where it began and which "has a greater familiarity with the parties' dispute." It asks Cresap to allow the matter to play out in federal court once the individual victims are no longer involved in the case. — AP



**WEST KALIMANTAN:** This picture taken on August 4, 2016 shows three orphaned orangutan babies hanging on a tree whilst attending "jungle school" at the International Animal Rescue centre outside the city of Ketapang. — AFP

## JUNGLE SCHOOL HELPS RESCUED ORANGUTANS RETURN TO WILD

### WORLD HAS NEVER BEEN MORE PERILOUS FOR THESE PRIMATES

**KETAPANG, Indonesia:** Ignoring the shrieks of his rowdy, wrestling classmates, baby orangutan Otan practices swinging alone at his "jungle school" on Borneo island, switching hands and hanging upside down as he builds confidence high above the forest floor. The three-year-old is learning to fend for himself since being found wandering a palm oil plantation, alone and suffering smoke inhalation, at the height of fires last year that razed huge swathes of rainforest in Indonesia's part of Borneo.

Otan and the other orphans must build nests, find food and avoid predators especially man-to prove they're ready to "graduate" and return to the wild, but life in the real world has never been more perilous for these primates. Last month, for the first time in history, Bornean orangutans were declared critically endangered-one step away from total extinction. Experts warn these majestic tree dwellers—who could once cross Borneo without ever touching the ground—could vanish entirely from the island within 50 years as the ancient rainforest they've inhabited for centuries is felled and burned at alarming speed. "It's heartbreaking," said Ayu Budi, a veterinarian who heads the orangutan health clinic at the International Animal Rescue centre in West Kalimantan province. "When you see them, it's really sad. They're supposed to be with their mothers in the wild, living happily, but they're here."

#### Situation 'desperate'

The 101 orangutans under Budi's care—including the 16 playful infants—are the lucky ones, rescued

near death and nurtured back to health with baby bottles in a tranche of protected forest outside the city of Ketapang. But hundreds of thousands of their kin have died in the past four decades across Borneo, slaughtered by hunters, burned in land-clearing fires or starved to death by habitat loss.

Rampant logging and the rapid expansion of commercial-scale paper and palm oil operations across the island has reduced the species' habitat by at least 55 percent in two decades, says environmental group WWF, driving them into ever-closer contact with humans. The result has been wild orangutan populations in freefall. In the mid 1970s, nearly 300,000 of these great apes roamed Borneo. Today, just a third of that number remain. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature—which changed the species' threat level to critical—estimates a mere 47,000 will be left in the wild by 2025. Those working at the coalface are under no illusions that efforts to arrest this decline have not succeeded, said Chris Wiggs, a conservation adviser at IAR's forest outpost in Ketapang. "I think people on the ground working in Borneo have known for a long time that the orangutan situation was pretty desperate," he told AFP, as a wheelbarrow of baby orangutans passed on its way to the nursery.

#### Fear of fire

The number of great apes at the centre has grown nearly tenfold since 2009 as ever-increasing amounts of forest is cleared by industry. Two of the school's newest pupils are Vijay and Moli who were found without their mothers near burned land.

They are the victims of fire, an annual scourge that's evolved into a major threat to the future of the species.

Every dry season across Indonesian Borneo—an island shared with Malaysia and Brunei—fires are illegally lit by land owners to quickly and cheaply clear forest for new plantations. The fires often get out of hand, tearing through forest and smoldering relentlessly on Borneo's compact, carbon-rich peatlands. Last year's blazes were among the worst on record. Fanned by a prolonged dry season, fires tore through 2.6 million hectares (10,000 square miles) of Indonesian forest, laying waste to prime orangutan habitat.

The smoke turned skies yellow in Indonesian Borneo and blanketed neighboring Singapore and Malaysia, forcing schools to shut and causing thousands to fall ill. Conservationists fear a repeat disaster of that scale would ring the death knell for the Bornean orangutan. "I think we're all pretty scared... whether the species can take another hit like that," Wiggs said.

#### 'Restore, rehabilitate'

Under international pressure, Jakarta has promised action. This month an Indonesian company linked to the 2015 fires was slapped with a \$80 million fine—a record for slash and burn activities, a spokesman for the environment minister said. Indonesian President Joko Widodo in April proposed a halt on granting new land for palm oil plantations, urging producers of the edible oil to use better seeds to increase their yields. — AFP

## EBOLA VIRUS LASTS IN SEMEN FOR UP TO 565 DAYS: STUDY

**CHICAGO:** The largest analysis yet has found Ebola virus particles present in semen as long as 565 days after recovery from an infection, highlighting the potential role of sex in sparking another outbreak, researchers reported on Tuesday. The study, published in the Lancet Global Health, involved 429 men seen between July 2015 and May 2016 who were part of the Liberian government's Men's Health Screening Program (MHSP), the first national semen testing program for Ebola virus.

Of the participants, 38 men tested positive during the study period. Within this group, 24 men, or nearly two thirds, had semen samples that tested positive for Ebola fragments a year after recovering from disease. Ebola tended to linger longer in men over age 40, the researchers said. In one case, Ebola was detected at least 565 days after a man recovered from his illness.

"Before this outbreak, scientists believed that Ebola virus could be found in semen for three months after recovery. With this study, we now know that virus may persist for a year or longer," said Dr. Moses Soka, coordinator of the Ebola Virus Disease Survivor Clinical Care at the Liberian Ministry of Health, who worked on the study. As part of Liberia's monitoring pro-

gram, male survivors aged 15 and older can enroll for monthly tests of their semen. Participants also get counseling on safe sex and condoms at each visit.

"This program provides important insights into how long Ebola remains in semen, a key component to preventing flare-ups of the disease and protecting survivors and their loved ones," Dr. Thomas Frieden, director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which is collaborating with the ministry. Other partners include the World Health Organization, and the Academic Consortium Combating Ebola in Liberia.

Semen samples in the study were tested for genetic fragments known as the viral RNA, but the tests could not tell if the virus was capable of spreading disease. Sexual contact with an Ebola survivor in March 2015 resulted in the infection and eventual death of a woman from Monrovia, even after Liberia had been declared free of Ebola. Tests of the man's semen showed the presence of Ebola virus 199 days after he first became ill. The World Health Organization advises that all male Ebola survivors should be tested three months after the onset of symptoms and then monthly until they know they have no risk of passing on the virus. — Reuters

## PEACEFUL SINGAPORE SUBURB BECOMES ZIKA BATTLEGROUND

**SINGAPORE:** Homemaker Sulaiha Ngatiman hunkered indoors as the scent of mosquito repellent lingered in her second-storey flat. The 30-year-old, who is seven months' pregnant with her fifth child, lives in Aljunied Crescent, a sleepy eastern suburb at the heart of Singapore's recent Zika outbreak and the scene of a war against the Aedes mosquito that carries the virus. Downstairs, fog-like smoke billowed as pest control crews armed with thermal machines fumigated drainage canals and other potential mosquito breeding spots.

"I'm very concerned because I've read that a lot of the symptoms can't be seen," Sulaiha told AFP from her living room, where mini bottles of mosquito repellent lined a table. The smell of citronella—a natural mosquito repellent—hung heavy in the air. "All a mother really wants is for your child to be healthy," added Sulaiha, who now limits her outdoor exposure. Zika, which has been detected in 58 countries including hardest-hit Brazil, causes only mild symptoms for most people, such as fever and a rash. But in pregnant women, it can cause microcephaly, a deformation in which babies are born with abnormally small brains and heads.

#### Insecticide and torch lights

As of Tuesday Singapore had confirmed 82 locally transmitted cases of Zika infection. The initial cases were reported at the weekend from the Aljunied area and since then, the neighborhood has been in the spotlight. Environment agency inspectors armed with cans of insecticide and torch lights, as well as pest control teams, have become a daily sight. On a visit by an AFP reporter Wednesday afternoon, the whine of thermal fumigators joined the roar of jets from a nearby military air base in puncturing the stillness.



**SINGAPORE:** Sulaiha Ngatiman is seen during an AFP interview at her home in the eastern suburb of Aljunied. — AFP

Local shopkeepers reported a surge in sales of mosquito repellent patches, sprays and devices. "I've sold out all my mosquito coil but people keep asking to buy patches and other things which I don't have," storekeeper Haranachia Mansoor, 30, told AFP. In spite of the increased infections, life was normal for a number of residents. "Most of us living here are old people so there are not many pregnant people anyway," said resident Chew Ah Gek, 72. "The government people come and check for mosquitoes all the time. There's no need to get worked up."

Leong Hoe Nam, an infectious diseases specialist at Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital, said people are not panicking because they trust the government's mosquito extermination efforts. — AFP

## NOVARTIS OK FOR BIOSIMILAR VERSION OF AMGEN'S ENBREL

**BASEL:** US regulators on Tuesday approved the first lower-cost version of Enbrel, a blockbuster anti-inflammatory drug from Amgen that is among the top-selling drugs in the world. The Food and Drug Administration cleared the near-copy of the drug, dubbed Erelzi, developed by Swiss drug giant Novartis, which would not disclose the planned list price for the drug.

A month's supply of Enbrel costs roughly \$4,000 or more in the US, according to figures from GoodRx, a drug pricing website. Enbrel was the fourth best-selling prescription drug in the world for 2015, according to health data firm IMS Health. The FDA approved Novartis' drug for the same diseases listed on Enbrel's label, including rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis and other immune system disorders. The announcement marks the third FDA approval of a so-called biosimilar drug, the industry term for generic biotech medicines, used to indicate they are not exact copies of the original products. Already available in Europe, the drugs have the potential to generate billions in savings for insurers, doctors and patients. But savings from Enbrel could be delayed for years due to an ongoing legal dispute over the drug, according to analyst reports.

Under a court order dated Aug 11, Amgen Inc. and Sandoz, a unit of Novartis, agreed to a preliminary injunction blocking

the launch of Erelzi. Both companies refused to discuss how long that injunction will last. Morgan Stanley analyst Matthew Harrison said the agreement indicates that a trial would not begin until April 2018. Under that timeline, a near-term launch of lower-cost Enbrel "is off the table," he states in a recent note to investors. Erelzi is Novartis' second competitor to an Amgen drug. Last March Novartis won approval for a biosimilar version of Amgen's drug Neupogen — the first biosimilar approved in the US. Pfizer won approval to market a second biosimilar in April, a version of Johnson & Johnson's Remicade.

Enbrel was Amgen's top-selling drug last year with \$5.1 billion in US sales and \$5.4 billion worldwide. The injectable medicine was first approved in 1998, part of a class of multi-billion dollar drugs that reduce inflammation and help control the immune system. The class also includes Remicade and AbbVie's Humira, which is also facing potential competition from biologic versions in development. Biotech drugs are powerful, injected medicines produced in living cells that are typically much more expensive than traditional, chemical-based drugs. In 2015, six of the 10 top-selling medicines globally were biotech drugs, with more than \$56 billion in combined sales. — AP

## US TO HOST WORLD'S LARGEST CONSERVATION CLIMATE MEET

**MIAMI:** Some 8,000 heads of state, policymakers and environmentalists convene in Hawaii this week for the world's largest gathering aimed at forging a path forward on the planet's toughest conservation problems. US President Barack Obama is expected to be among the world leaders in Honolulu as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) opens its World Conservation Congress, held every four years in a different location around the globe.

This year, the conference theme of "Planet at the Crossroads" is aimed at exposing the plight of island nations that are at risk of disappearing in the coming decades due to rising seas. It is the first major environmental meeting of global leaders since the Paris climate talks last year. The September 1-10 conference also marks the first time the IUCN World Conservation Congress has been held in the United States since the meeting was first convened in 1948.

Arguments are expected on hotly debated issues such as what to do about domestic ivory markets which lead to the killing of elephants for their tusks, and how to feed the world's growing population without exhausting its natural resources. "There should be a fair amount of fireworks," John Robinson, the head of the Wildlife Conservation Society's global conservation program told AFP.

Obama's visit—if it is not disrupted by Hurricane Madeline—comes on the heels of his move last week to expand the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National

Monument in the northwestern Hawaiian islands, making it the world's largest marine protected area. In Honolulu on Wednesday, Obama plans to address the Pacific Island Conference of Leaders and the IUCN World Conservation Congress, before departing for Midway Atoll the next day.

"The President will be discussing the role that remote islands play in the climate context, but also the importance of the intersection between conser-

vation and climate change as we face an increasingly severe threat of climate change in these parts of the world," said Brian Deese, Obama's senior advisor. Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security advisor, described the event as "an important opportunity to bring together not just Pacific island leaders who have been a motivating factor around the urgency of action against climate change, but also conservation advocates from around the world." — AFP



**NEVADA:** This April 12, 2012 file photo shows the clarity of Lake Tahoe, Nevada. President Barack Obama plans to speak at the 20th annual environmental summit at Lake Tahoe. — AP