



## **Rubella outbreak in Pacific**

An outbreak of rash and fever, which started in Samoa in June, has been confirmed as rubella and the outbreak appears to have spread to Tokelau.

A paediatrician at Auckland Starship Hospital, Dr Elizabeth Wilson, recalls a recent discussion with a colleague in Samoa about probable rubella encephalitis in a ten-year-old.

“We have already lost two children to this and it is very likely we have a large non-immune population,” the Samoa-based paediatrician said.

A rubella epidemic affected Tonga from April to November 2002 however to-date, no Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS) cases have been identified.

A notable feature of the Tongan outbreak was a high rate of rubella encephalitis (inflammation of the brain). In response, Tonga has since introduced rubella immunisation for all children.

Rubella, also known as German measles, is a common childhood disease that can affect non-immune adults and often occurs in epidemics.

Its often-mild symptoms and the similarity of the rash to many other infections make clinical diagnosis difficult, and a blood test is usually required to confirm infection.



Complications of rubella include arthritis, encephalitis and neo-natal deaths. Rubella infection in women during early pregnancy usually leads to Congenital Rubella Syndrome (CRS) which results in very severe complications including deafness, blindness and intellectual handicap.

Despite offering free childhood immunisation against rubella since the 1970s, New Zealand has recorded regular outbreaks in 1990, 1993 and most recently 1995.

The potential for rubella to spread to New Zealand and the risk of exposure in pregnant women reinforces the need for all children and non-immune women of child-bearing age to be immunised.

The following quote is from the mother of a child with congenital rubella syndrome. Her name has been changed to protect her privacy. “Jane” is happy for her story to be used in this press release but does not wish to be interviewed by the media.

From Jane:

“I was working in the paediatric wards in my first year and I was not aware at the time but I must have been caring for young children with rubella and I subsequently found myself pregnant. I was 18 and I delivered when I was 19.



While I was still in the maternity home they detected cataracts on her eyes and she had a heart murmur and they felt that the outlook was very bleak, they didn't think she would survive and they thought that she would be severely mentally retarded.

This was an absolutely devastating experience for me. It made me grow up in a very big way as you can imagine as a 19 year old. I was devastated at having produced a child so severely disabled, and had a huge sense of guilt; it took me a long time to resolve.

My daughter now is 33. She does not speak, she has no eyesight at all, she is completely deaf, her sensory input is through vibration and smell. As far as activities, one of the common things she does is puzzles and the sort of puzzles that you would give to a 2 year old, you know the wooden type puzzles which she does all by touch. There is also the hurt, that the relationship of a mother and a child is never able to get established, because of her disability, so that's another, another grief.

I don't know what her life span will be but certainly there is going to be a period of time when hopefully rubella just isn't seen again, because certainly to have it in the early stages of pregnancy is just devastating . I wouldn't wish it on your worst enemy. It has been very painful for me, and I think, I will carry that for the rest of my life."

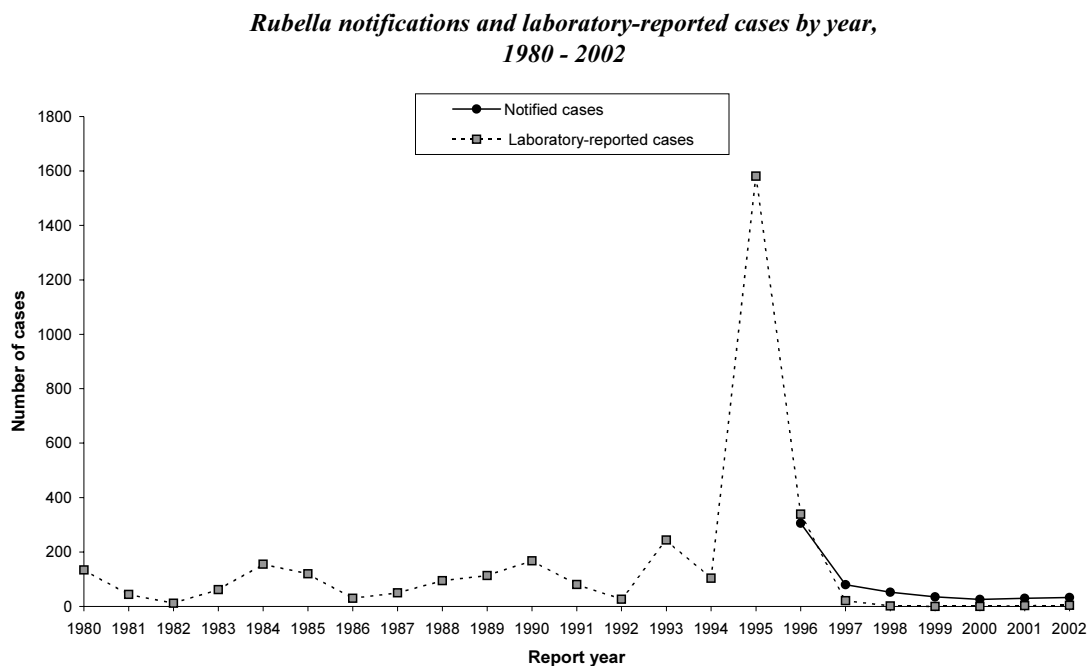
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The following graph shows :

Cases of Rubella Reported in New Zealand 1980 – 2002.

Source: Environment Science and Research Ltd (ESR)



Surveillance data gives a relatively incomplete picture of rubella as the disease only became notifiable in 1996 and rarely results in hospital admission. Overall, this data suggest that the incidence of rubella has declined since the last national epidemic in 1995. It is also reassuring that there have not been any cases of congenital rubella syndrome reported to the Paediatric Surveillance Unit since 1998, when a nine-year-old case of Samoan ethnicity was notified. (ESR)

Further information can be found on [www.imac.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.imac.auckland.ac.nz)

or by phoning 0800 immune (466 863).



### **Update from the NZ Ministry of Health 7/10/003**

"The National Immunisation Programme, Ministry of Health, has been advised that the suspected rubella cases in the Tokelau islands have been confirmed. The Ministry of Health will be assisting the Tokelau Department of Health in a vaccination campaign to protect children and young adults, with the support of NZAID.

The ongoing outbreaks of rubella in the Pacific are a timely reminder of the importance of protection against rubella and the need for all children and non-immune women of child-bearing age to be immunised to prevent rubella and congenital rubella syndrome. NZ's vaccination coverage is still not adequate to prevent epidemics here, and a number of cases are still notified every year, despite the vaccine being safe, effective and free."

Ministry of Health contact:

Dr Clair Mills

Manager, National Immunisation Programme

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