

Inside UTHealth

UTHealth School of Public Health holds coronavirus expert panel

Published: February 07, 2020 by Aaron Nieto, UTHealth School of Public Health



Despite the absence of coronavirus cases in Texas, its impact is being felt by local communities. Public health experts from regional counties, the state of Texas, and UTHealth School of Public Health gathered on Wednesday, Feb. 5, to discuss the virus. (Photo by Aaron Nieto/UTHealth School of Public Health)

In response to increasing concerns of 2019-nCoV (coronavirus), public health experts from the southeast Texas region and UTHealth School of Public Health gathered on Wednesday, Feb. 5, to discuss what is known, unknown, and what to anticipate about this new strain of coronavirus.

“There is a lot of unfolding information,” said Umair Shah, MD, MPH, executive director of Harris County Public Health. “It is important to remember that what we know today is going to be very different from what we know a week from now, a month from now.”

The CDC reports the virus was initially identified in late 2019 in Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China, and is believed to have been linked to a large seafood and animal market in Wuhan, suggesting zoonotic origin. Since its original identification, more than 25,000 cases of 2019n-CoV have been confirmed around the world, primarily in China.

There are currently no reported cases of the virus in Harris County; however, public health officials said they are confident that should a case be discovered in Texas, the state’s medical infrastructure is capable of managing containment and treatment of the virus.

Feedback



“As a community and as a region we have never been more ready for an outbreak than right now,” said Luis Ostrosky, MD, professor of medicine and epidemiology at McGovern Medical School at UTHealth. “In recent years we have experienced SARS, MERS, and Ebola. We’ve drafted policies. We will be purchasing personal protective equipment. It is a matter of plugging in the right pathogen and the right signage, and we’re ready to go.”

Philip Keiser, MD, Galveston County Local Health Authority, cited that since the virus’ genetic sequence has been made available to medical professionals, the virus itself has been successfully replicated by numerous investigators around the country. He said a candidate vaccine could be available in as little as three months. Keiser specializes in infectious diseases and also serves as the international HIV program and clinic director at UTMB Health.

Despite the virus’ absence in Texas, its impact is being felt by local communities.

“We’ve responded to concerns in our local Asian American community, and found there are a lot of rumors about members of this community (possibly having coronavirus),” Shah said. “The Asian American community is not at an increased risk of contracting the virus, unless they have traveled to certain parts of the world in the past 14 days.”

Panelists also warned about the spread of virus misinformation via social media, referring to numerous posts with outdated images and false claims. Vigilance among social media users against outrageous claims was encouraged.

Vice President of Safety, Health, Environment, and Risk Management at UTHealth Robert Emery, DrPH, who coordinated the panel, emphasized to students the importance of cooperation among various public health agencies and skill sets. He said it “represents a wonderful learning opportunity for students to understand how such events unfold.”

The panel included experts from city of Houston Emergency Medical Services, Harris County Public Health, Southeast Texas Regional Advisory Council as well as academic experts from UTHealth School of Public Health, McGovern Medical School at UTHealth, UTMB Health.

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