EDITORIAL

HEPATITIS E: AN EMERGING VIRAL ILLNESS OF THE LIVER

Hepatitis E is an RNA virus that causes both acute and chronic hepatitis. It is a member of the Orthohepevirus genus and of the Hepeviridae family. It occurs in both epidemics and sporadically and it is becoming clear that it is perhaps the most common cause of viral Hepatitis. It occurs in all regions of the world, although it is believed that it is more common in less developed countries.

Hepatitis E exists in four species A to D with human disease caused mainly by species A. There are 8 genotypes of species A. Two species occur only in humans and 2 species are endemic in several animals causing zoonotic infections in humans. The remaining 4 genotypes are restricted to wild boars and camels, although human infection is still possible.

Despite the widespread occurrence, the clinical phenotype of HEV infection remains incompletely characterised and the majority of infections are not characterised or remain undiagnosed.

Until recently there were no efficient cell-culture models available. The range of clinical, epidemiological patterns and routes of transmission vary widely by genotype, characteristics, geographical location and over time both acute and chronic infections have been observed and a wide range of extrahepatic manifestations reported. These include haematological, renal and neurological manifestations. Taken together, these factors present a lot of challenges to understanding and appreciating the threat posed by HEV to human health and disease control.

A lot still remains unknown about HEV and research on viral biology is urgently needed.

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