Reviewer’s report

Title: Sentinel surveillance for human enterovirus 71 in Sarawak, Malaysia: Lessons from the first 7 years.

Version: Date: 8 March 2006

Reviewer: Steve Oberste

Reviewer’s report:

General

Podin et al. describe a hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) surveillance program, established in Sarawak state, Malaysia, in 1998, following a large outbreak of enterovirus 71 (EV71) associated with multiple fatalities in 1997. HFMD occurred throughout the period 1998-2005, predominantly associated with EV71, coxsackievirus A16, and coxsackievirus A10. Large outbreaks due to EV71 occurred in 2000 and 2003.

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

Page 7 (serotype identification) and page 10 (phylogenetic analysis): While VP4 sequence has been reasonably well validated for analysis of EV71 strains, it is important to note that this finding may not extend to other serotypes (J Clin Microbiol 34:313-318; J Virol Meth 65:138-148).

Page 11 (genogroup shift), Page 15, and page 16 (conclusions-b-c): Since cases associated with genogroup C also occur outside the “epidemic” periods, the authors should consider the possibility that genogroup C represents the “normal” background activity in Sarawak (endemic circulation), while genogroup B viruses either arise from an unknown/undetected reservoir in Sarawak or are repeatedly introduced from outside. It is difficult to tell which is more likely without more sequence of viruses from outside Sarawak (e.g., peninsular Malaysia) in Fig. 2-3. Is there any explanation for why genogroup B seems to cause the big outbreaks? What was the predominant genogroup(s) in the Malaysia 1997 and Taiwan 1998 outbreaks?

Page 13 (virus isolation): Any idea why the overall data are different from the experience in the first 18 months?

Table 3: There are not four significant digits in an age (0.0001 month is about 4 minutes). There should be no more than one digit to the right of the decimal.

Figure 5: I’m a little confused—is this figure HFMD or EV71? Please clarify.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)
What is the annual birth cohort (i.e., new susceptibles) during this period?

**What next?:** Accept after minor essential revisions

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests