Reviewer's report

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

Version: 2 Date: 17 May 2006

Reviewer: Mark Pallansch

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General
What the authors contend is that the non-significant difference in age by serotype in Table 3 can be used to argue that the data in Table 4 is not affected by age, but only serotype. This is not correct. The failure to show significance only leads to the conclusion that the observed differences in age have a small probability that they could be derived by chance alone (particularly with a p-value of 0.06). This is not equivalent to saying that there is no difference in age between the groups, which is clear as evidenced by the means and ranges in the CA10 group. The statistical analysis of table 3 and table 4 are fine alone, but if the authors wish to link tables 3 and 4 logically they need to explicitly test the lack of age dependency of fever, which is possible by several methods. For example, they could show that the age distributions for fever-positive and fever-negative children are not different in the CA16 and EV71 groups (Wilcoxon). Alternatively, they could stratify the data by age and directly compare the rates of fever in each age strata by serotype (Mantel-Haenszel). A third alternative is to delete table 4 and the accompanying text, since this is not a major focus of a sentinel surveillance system as the authors have noted in their response to reviewers and has the least likelihood of all the findings to be generalizeable due to restricted epidemiological context.

Table 2 could still be more helpful if it included specific results by specimen type. This would help also with the data described on p14 of different isolation rates by serotype and year, but also making clear the isolation rate for the highlighted viruses by specimen type. It is currently not possible to go from the 491 positive specimens in table 2 to the 376 viruses in table 3 by specimen type (serotype isolation rates by specimen types for CA10, CA16, EV71, and other NPEV).

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

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)