

FOOTBALL VIRUS

October 25, 2000

The Associated Press

Linda A. Johnson Writer



Christine Moe, an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and other researchers were cited as reporting in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine that college football players sick with food poisoning passed the virus to the opposing team on the field in the first documented case of its kind in sports. The Duke University teammates vomited in the locker room and on the sidelines during the Sept. 19, 1998, game against Florida State after getting sick on a turkey lunch. Duke lost 62-13, but not before the virus crossed the line of scrimmage.

Moe was quoted as saying, "The only contact between the two teams was on the playing field. The virus was passed by people touching each other's contaminated hands, uniforms and maybe even the football itself." Game films showed ill Duke players with vomit on their jerseys colliding with opponents, and Duke players wiping their mouthpieces on their hands, then touching opponents' faces and later shaking their hands.

The researchers urged coaches to bench players with such illnesses and stress the importance of handwashing when ill and after using the bathroom. The food- and waterborne virus, which is from a family called Norwalk-like viruses because the first outbreak was detected at a Norwalk, Ohio, school in the late 1960s, causes vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhea. The virus family causes an estimated 96 percent of cases of nonbacterial gastroenteritis, or inflammation of the stomach and intestines. It gets far less attention than food-borne bacteria such as E. coli because it causes no permanent damage and rarely kills. Person-to-person transmission sometimes occurs in crowded living situations, such as on cruise ships.

Karen Becker, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who led the study was cited as saying this is the first documented case of transmission among participants in a sports event. Becker was cited as saying that many Duke players and staff fell ill by game time, a day after they ate contaminated turkey sandwiches in a box lunch, adding that, "By the middle of the second quarter, several players, including three of the defensive starters, were on IVs in the locker room." Altogether, 43 of the Duke players and staff who ate the turkey, or 62 percent, got sick. They transmitted it to 11 other Duke personnel who had not eaten the sandwiches and to 11 Florida State players but no staffers.

"It emphasizes the infectious nature of the organism," Becker said. Dr. Mary K. Estes, a professor of molecular virology and microbiology at Baylor College of Medicine who is developing a vaccine and hopes to have it ready in five years, was cited as saying the virus is hardy enough to survive on unbleached surfaces and carpet for months. All 11 Florida State players who got sick were on offense, an indication of how much Florida State dominated the game against the weakened Duke team.

Source: FSNet Oct 25/00 – II