

VISION



‘Rapid spread of coronavirus is worrying’

The coronavirus is claiming more and more victims. How dangerous is it? The rapid spread of the virus is very worrying, says Wageningen virologist Wim van der Poel. But he sees some good news too.

You have seen various other virus outbreaks. What strikes you about this coronavirus?

‘This coronavirus has almost the same genetics and symptoms as the SARS virus but it is spreading far quicker. It’s still a mystery why that is. With SARS, patients had clinical symptoms of illness before they spread the virus. That helped to stop it spreading. Epidemiologists suspect that the coronavirus is spreading before there are visible signs of illness.’

Does this have implications for the efforts to combat it?

‘The centre of the virus outbreak is the Chinese city of Wuhan in Hubei province. That makes the necessary approach clear: prevent human traffic with this province and put people coming from this province in quarantine. In Germany, for instance, the virus was found in people who had had contact with a woman from Hubei who was diagnosed with the virus. In Italy it went wrong: a visitor from Hubei who seemed to have recovered from the virus and tested negative was not put in quarantine and went on to infect others.’

Can we expect a pandemic?

‘The way the coronavirus outbreak is developing is very worrying and it could become a world-wide epidemic. On the other hand, the mortality rate is falling. You often see that with viruses. At the start of the outbreak, doctors only count the most severe cases as only those come to their attention. Then a laboratory test is made available and everyone with a cough is tested, including people who don’t become ill from the virus. Then the percentage of deaths declines. The mortality rate for the coronavirus is currently estimated at 2 per cent, which is still not good. It is quite possible that this rate will decrease further because the virus may become less virulent over time. But I have to add that this is a new virus and it could behave differently.’

What is WUR doing about the coronavirus?

‘We have tests available for testing animals. Other scientists are working on vaccines for the virus. Once they have them, the vaccines will have to be tested extensively on animals. We have a very secure test location in Lelystad for such research.’ **AS**