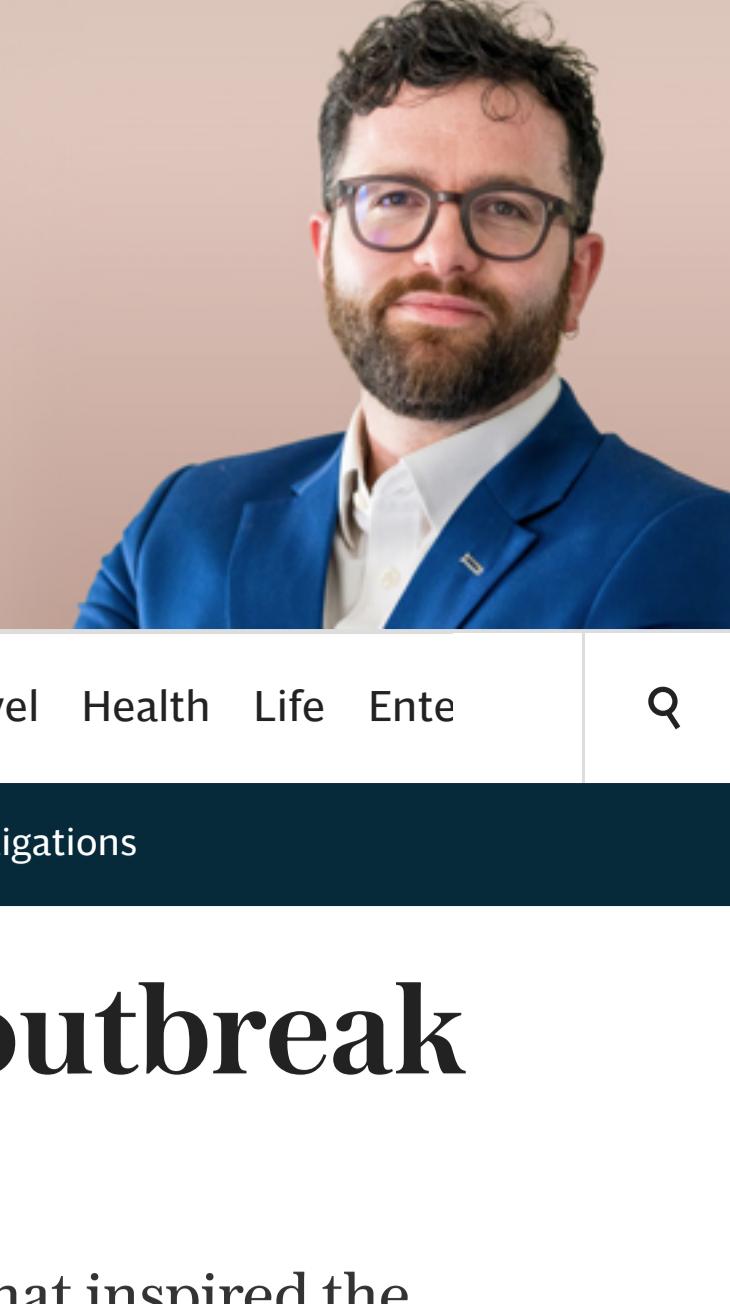


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## Health experts scramble to contain outbreak of deadly Nipah virus

Two nurses at a hospital in India are infected with the bat-borne pathogen that inspired the Hollywood film Contagion

Samaan Lateef in Mumbai

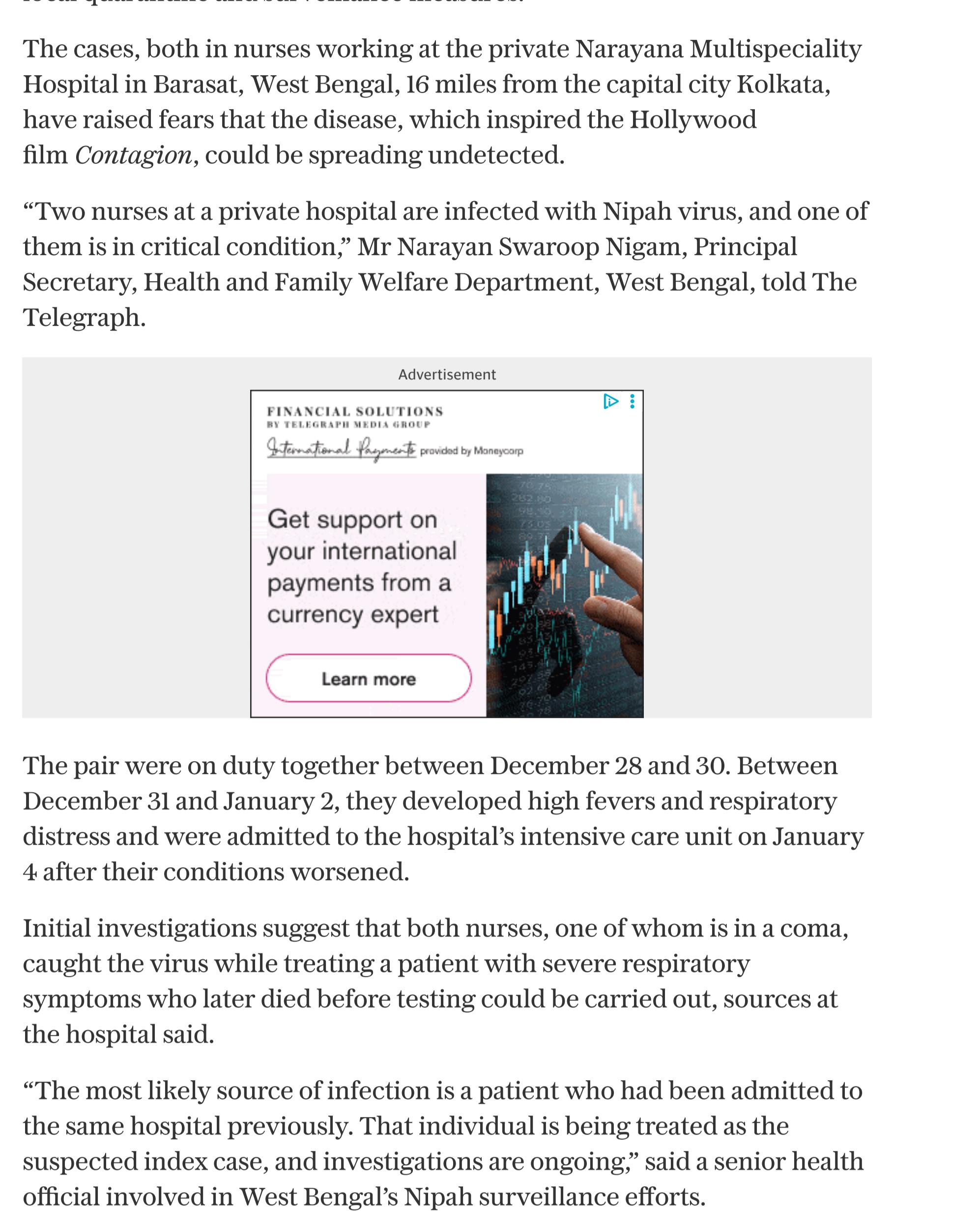
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X f s e



India has faced sporadic outbreaks of Nipah in recent years, including one in Kerala two years ago. Credit: CK Thanneer/REUTERS

Two cases of Nipah virus, a rare, bat-borne pathogen, have been confirmed in an Indian hospital, prompting a nationwide alert as well as local quarantine and surveillance measures.

The cases, both in nurses working at the private Narayana Multispeciality Hospital in Barasat, West Bengal, 16 miles from the capital city Kolkata, have raised fears that the disease, which inspired the Hollywood film *Contagion*, could be spreading undetected.

"Two nurses at a private hospital are infected with Nipah virus, and one of them is in critical condition," Mr Narayan Swaroop Nigam, Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare Department, West Bengal, told The Telegraph.

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The pair were on duty together between December 28 and 30. Between December 31 and January 2, they developed high fevers and respiratory distress and were admitted to the hospital's intensive care unit on January 4 after their conditions worsened.

Initial investigations suggest that both nurses, one of whom is in a coma, caught the virus while treating a patient with severe respiratory symptoms who later died before testing could be carried out, sources at the hospital said.

"The most likely source of infection is a patient who had been admitted to the same hospital previously. That individual is being treated as the suspected index case, and investigations are ongoing," said a senior health official involved in West Bengal's Nipah surveillance efforts.

The outbreak prompted the health authorities to impose quarantine and emergency surveillance and contact tracing measures in the area.

So far 180 people have been tested and 20 high risk contacts quarantined.

"All of them are asymptomatic and tested negative. We will again test them before their 21-day quarantine ends," Mr Nigam said.

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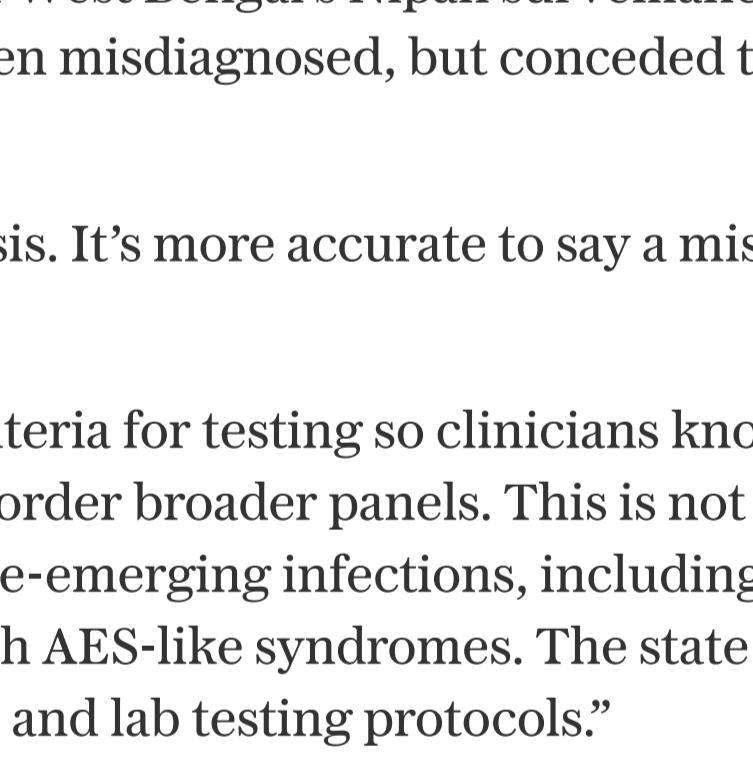
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**'We survived the terrifying disease that inspired Contagion – our blood may help to treat it'**

In 1999, Sungai Nipah village was ground zero in an infectious disease outbreak that killed 105 people, infected a further 160, and destroyed a billion-dollar pig-farming industry. The virus, which inspired the film *Contagion*, attacks the brain and has a fatality rate as high as 70 per cent. Now, survivors are giving their blood to scientists racing to develop vaccines, in a push to prevent a similar scenario ever unfolding again.



India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare issued a nationwide alert, urging states to strengthen surveillance, detection, and preventive measures to reduce risk and prevent any further spread.

India has faced sporadic outbreaks of Nipah in recent years. The virus lives in bats and can be passed to humans through contaminated food or by contact with the bodily fluids of infected animals. It can also jump from bats to pigs, opening up another route for onward transmission to people, where it spreads from person to person through droplets and saliva.

The virus has a fatality rate of up to 75 per cent and causes a range of symptoms, beginning with a fever, vomiting and fatigue before developing into respiratory issues and swelling of the brain. Neurological issues like encephalitis can appear months or years after an initial infection.

In response to the new cases, several Indian states have directed their health authorities to strengthen surveillance for Acute Encephalitis Syndrome (AES), a broad term for brain inflammation that can be caused by Nipah infection.

"Persons admitted with AES, particularly those with travel or contact history linked to West Bengal, should be closely monitored and evaluated for possible Nipah virus infection," reads one advisory issued by the authorities in Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India.

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The focus on examining cases of AES will help stop undiagnosed Nipah infections from flying under the radar, said Ali Althaf, a senior health official at Government Medical College, Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala, who has done extensive work on the Nipah virus.

"There were over 100 cases of AES, a key indicator for diseases like Nipah, reported last year in Kerala, and if we subjected all of them to diagnostic testing, it's plausible that we'd uncover a greater number of Nipah infections," he told The Telegraph.

Misidentifying Nipah infections as AES or as other respiratory illnesses has serious consequences, particularly for healthcare providers, he added.

"We have repeatedly seen human-to-human transmission occurring within hospital settings," he said. "When cases are not recognised early, healthcare workers are placed at the highest risk of exposure to this often fatal virus."

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