



ZHEJIANG: Chinese workers cleaning the slaughtered sharks at a processing factory located in Pu Qi in China's Zhejiang province. A factory which processes around 600 whale sharks annually has been found in southern China, a conservation group said yesterday, calling it the world's biggest slaughterhouse for the endangered species. The slaughterhouse also handles other species of sharks including blue sharks and basking sharks and produces 200 tons of shark oil annually from the three species, its owner — identified only as Li — said in undercover video footage released by the group. — AFP

1 IN 4 JAPAN TSUNAMI KIDS NEEDS PSYCHIATRIC CARE

TOKYO: One in four nursery school children caught up in Japan's 2011 tsunami disaster has psychiatric problems caused by the horrors of loss and destruction, with experts warning of a dire shortage of psychiatrists.

Researchers say that for some children, the effects may be felt throughout their lifetimes unless they get the help they so urgently need. A study found 25.9 percent of children aged between three and five suffer from symptoms including vertigo, nausea and headaches, with some exhibiting worrying behavior such as violence or withdrawal. Youngsters were scarred by losing friends, seeing their homes destroyed, by separation from parents or by the sight of the huge wall of water that crashed ashore, the study team said. The group, led by professor Shigeo Kure of Tohoku University School of Medicine, said young children who do not receive the necessary care could develop much worse problems in later life.

These could include developmental disorders and learning disabilities, which would affect academic achievement and employment prospects, "as they may have trouble in communicating with other people due to the influence of experiences related to the disaster", Kure told AFP.

More than 18,000 people died when a 9.0-magnitude undersea earthquake sent a towering tsunami into Japan's northeast coast in March 2011. The country's worst post-World War II disaster was compounded by reactor meltdowns at the Fukushima nuclear power plant, which sent tens of thousands of people fleeing from radiation.

Researchers looked at 178 children whose parents or guardians agreed to cooperate in the three areas worst-hit by the catastrophe—Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima. They used an internationally recognized child behavior checklist and met children between September 2012

and June last year.

The level of children who need psychiatric care is up to three times that seen in parts of Japan unaffected by the disaster—for example, 8.5 percent of children in Mie prefecture in central Japan need help.

"I was surprised at the percentage of children who need medical care. I didn't expect it would be this high," Kure said. "These children who were part of our study have received and will keep receiving psychiatric care in the coming years, but another issue is how to make contact with children whose need for psychiatric care has not yet been identified," he said.

"I imagine there are lots of children, who seemingly are leading normal lives but show behavior that needs a doctor's attention, for example, waking up suddenly at midnight or biting their nails." What makes the situation more difficult is the scarcity of child psychiatrists in rural Japan, he continued.

Even in Sendai, the biggest city in the area with a population of more than a million, "there are only a handful of child psychiatrists as far as I know," he said. "What child psychiatrists in our team have been doing is to ask parents and teachers to pay attention to children" due partly to the shortage of psychiatrists, he said.

Makiko Okuyama of the National Center for Child Health and Development, who took part in the study, said the results were worrying. "It is known that children need (psychiatric) care right after an earthquake disaster, but this study was done more than a year and half after the fact, so that concerns me," she said, according to the Mainichi Shimbun.

An official at the health ministry said officials would closely examine the final report when it is produced in around two months' time and consider whether current psychiatric healthcare provision is meeting needs. — AFP

GOOD HABITS, FIERY SPIRIT GIVE CANADIAN ATHLETE, 94, HER EDGE

NEW YORK: For 94-year-old Canadian Olga Kotelko, it's not the high jump, javelin throw, pole vault or sprint that poses the biggest fitness challenge. It's finding someone age-appropriate to compete against. Kotelko, a Vancouver-based retired school teacher, took up track and field at age 77. She has a closet full of medals, but with so few other women athletes in her age bracket, she often finds herself competing against 80- to 85-year-olds, or men.

"I love competing against athletes my own age but if I don't have any, I'll compete against myself," said Kotelko, who sprints, throws and jumps in 11 track and field events. Kotelko defies the standard image of aging and typifies what scientists call compression of morbidity. She has managed to postpone the onset of chronic or debilitating illness and is still going strong.

Born on a farm in Saskatchewan, Kotelko played softball in her youth, but did not take up another sport until after retirement, when she became addicted to track and field. To keep her edge, she works out for at least an hour and a half every day. She takes a water aerobics class three times a week, and regularly does stretching exercises, deep breathing, and reflexology for her hands and feet.

"I'll end up with splits," said Kotelko, who often hits the exercise mat in the middle of a sleepless night. Canadian author Bruce Grieron lives near Kotelko. While bedeviled by his own midlife aches and pains, he was so astonished by her feats that he persuaded her to allow scientists to study her in hopes of uncovering her secret to aging well. His recent book "What Makes Olga Run" chronicles her story and the test results. "She was curious about her own physiology, so she agreed to be a bit of an open book," Grieron, 51, said. The results of the scientific studies at The Beckman Institute in Urbana, Illinois, which did a battery of MRIs and memory and cognitive tests on Kotelko, show that her health and prowess are mainly due to a combination of good habits, a positive attitude, and her

naturally driven personality.

"It's impossible to tease out what's driving the bus," he said, "But genes aren't the half of it with Olga. It's the way she has lived her life." Tests showed that, by some measures, Kotelko has the brain of a 50- or 60-year-old, according to Grieron. Often the gap between brain and skull grows with aging but Kotelko's resembles that of a much younger person.

Her hippocampus, a small region of the brain associated with memory and spatial navigation that is known to respond well to exercise, looks especially good.

But Grieron said she showed signs of aging in other areas, and despite Kotelko's abilities, she finds it difficult to learn new techniques. McGill University in Montreal conducted physiological tests that are ongoing. Scientists there are preparing to analyze her blood to see if anything about it could explain her vigor.

Kotelko said she avoids injury by keeping her body tuned up, not training when it rains, and eating four or five small meals a day. "She's very attuned to what her body is telling her. She doesn't get overstressed," Grieron said.

"Her high jump may not be super high, but she still springs off the ground with good technique," he explained. "She's rare. It's called compression of mortality: You go great guns till almost the very end." Dr Robert E Sallis, a physician with the American College of Sports Medicine, explained it as squaring off the geriatric curve that plots functional capacity, versus age.

"People who are inactive tend to lose functional capacity much earlier than those who are active," Sallis said. But those who remain active and fit can maintain a high functional capacity, often almost until they die. "So you see a squaring of their geriatric curve and a high functional capacity right up until the end," he said.

But for Kotelko it's all about living a high-quality life. "I don't feel my body's old," she said. "I don't know what old is." — Reuters

CHINA 'DOWNGRADES' BIRD FLU DESCRIPTION AS 'INFECTIOUS' H7N9 CASES SPIKE AHEAD OF LUNAR NEW YEAR

BEIJING: China has reportedly downgraded H7N9 bird flu in humans, dropping its description as "infectious" in new guidelines on how to deal with the disease, even as new cases spike with the onset of winter. The National Health and Family Planning Commission described it as a "communicable acute respiratory disease" in its 2014 diagnosis and treatment protocols.

In the 2013 version it was considered as an "infectious disease". The Beijing Times yesterday quoted an unnamed Beijing disease control centre official saying that health authorities decided to "make the downgrade" on the basis that nearly a year of analysis had shown H7N9 was "not strongly infectious". The H7N9 human outbreak began in China in February 2013 and reignited fears that a bird flu virus could mutate to become easily transmissible between people, potentially triggering a pandemic.

The guidelines come as human cases undergo a seasonal spike, with 95 cases confirmed in mainland China so far this month according to an AFP tally of reports by local authorities. More than half have been in the eastern province of Zhejiang, with 24 in Guangdong in the south. So far seven patients have died in mainland China this year. That compares with 144 confirmed cases, including 46 deaths, in the whole of 2013 according to official statistics.

It was not clear whether the rise in cases and decrease in fatality rate so far are due to the virus becoming more widespread and possibly less severe, or detection and treatment improving. Cases and deaths dropped significantly after the end of June, but have begun to pick up with the onset of winter.

"So far, most cases have been sporadic and there were some cluster outbreaks among family members," the commission said in the guidelines. "But there is no evidence of sustained human-to-human transmission yet," it said, although it added that "limited" and "unsustained" infections could not be ruled out. In the past China has been accused of trying to cover up disease, particularly Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which killed about 800 people around the world in 2003.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has more recently praised its openness and response to the outbreaks of bird flu. WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl told AFP: "There's been an increase in the number of cases, not deaths. The deaths haven't increased that much."

"This is winter, and all influenza viruses disseminate much more easily, much more widely, in winter, so it is not unexpected to see more cases," he said. The health commission guidelines shortened the disease's incubation period from seven days to three to four days, and the Beijing Times said hospitals would reduce the quarantine time for suspected exposures accordingly.

The health commission also inserted the phrase "particularly the elderly" in its description of those vulnerable to the virus, who it specifies are those who have had contact with poultry or have been to a live poultry market in the week before showing symptoms.

A spate of bird flu cases since the beginning of the year in China has experts watching closely as millions of people and poultry are on the move ahead of the Lunar New Year holiday, the

world's largest annual human migration.

China has reported more than 50 H7N9 infections in 2014 after the strain jumped from birds to people for the first time last year. The virus remains hard to catch and most cases have been linked to contact with poultry, but scientists worry that could change if it mutates into a form that allows it to spread easily among people. For those who track influenza, the holiday, which begins Jan. 31, is always worrying because it comes during the winter months when flu typically rages. Add that to hundreds of millions of people - and often birds - crammed together on buses and other forms of transportation going home, and it's always a bit of a gamble. China estimates 3.6 billion trips will be taken over the holiday season.

"This is the first winter we've seen H7N9. We are in uncharted territory," said Gregory Hartl, World Health Organization spokesman in Geneva. "We have seen an upstart in cases, which we are attributing basically to the fact that it's winter. That combined with a lot of movement of people in crowded trains with chickens could give rise to a lot more infections, but we've also seen in past years where it hasn't."

The first H7N9 cases were reported in late March near Shanghai, and more than 200 others have since been identified, including some 50 deaths. A 31-year-old doctor became one of the latest fatalities, raising fears he may have been infected at the hospital where he worked, but none of his patients or other close contacts have reported flu symptoms, according to the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Health and Family Planning. — AFP



SEOUL: Health officials remove eggs from a duck farm suspected of carrying avian influenza, in Naju, South Korea's Jeolla province. South Korea imposed yesterday, a 12-hour lockdown on poultry farms in three provinces to curb a spreading bird flu outbreak, banning the movement of animals, people and vehicles. — AFP

SOUTH KOREA ORDERS BIRD FLU LOCKDOWN

SEOUL: South Korea imposed yesterday a 12-hour lockdown on poultry farms in three provinces to curb a spreading bird flu outbreak, banning the movement of animals, people and vehicles. More than 640,000 poultry have already been slaughtered since the outbreak was first detected on January 16 at a duck farm in Gochang, 300 kilometers (187 miles) southwest of Seoul.

The H5N8 strain of bird flu has since been identified in 17 other farms, with tests being carried out in 22 others, and a further 810,000 poultry have been identified for slaughter. The 12-

hour travel ban on poultry farmers and other members of the industry, including vets, took effect at 6:00am yesterday (2100 GMT Sunday) in Gyeonggi province—which surrounds Seoul—and the provinces of South and North Chungcheong. The South Korean capital was not included in the lockdown. During the 12-hour period, local officials will oversee disinfection operations at all farms in the region. It is the first bird flu outbreak in South Korea since 2011, when more than six million poultry were culled at about 280 farms.

The lockdown comes amid fears that the mass movement of people during the coming Lunar

New Year holiday will fan the spread of the disease. Millions of people travel to their hometowns in rural areas to meet relatives and pay respects at ancestors' graves during the traditional holiday, which this year lasts from January 30 to February 2.

"What holiday? I'm too busy protecting my ducks," one poultry farmer in Gochang told the local Maeil Business Newspaper. "This catastrophe is overshadowing and unnerving the whole village. I told my children never even dream of coming home this year," another Gochang resident said. — AFP

CHINA'S 'KING' EATER HAS MORE TO STOMACH

LIUYANG, China: After swallowing two dozen bowls of noodles, the surprisingly lean man described as China's "Big Stomach King" had barely broken sweat and announced his hunger for more.

"I can continue," said Pan Yizhong, fragments of noodle visible at the edge of his mouth, as challengers at an eating competition fell away one by one in the face of his relentless appetite.

"Come on, Big Stomach King!" the audience shouted at the event, held in a kung fu school, while its straggle-bearded headmaster looked on. Once he passed the 25th bowl, there were no more opponents and the cheers fell away into awed silence. "The Big Stomach King is our hero," said Lu Nan, one of Pan's defeated competitors. "He has magic powers." Pan, 45, is the most celebrated exponent of the art of competitive eating

in China—although he says his gut-busting quest has cost him his marriage. He has previously dispatched 147 dumplings in a single sitting and once polished off 40 bowls of noodles in 15 minutes, but some view him with revulsion in a country just beginning to grapple with widespread obesity.

Just a decade before Pan's birth, as many as 45 million people died in the famine resulting from Mao Zedong's disastrous Great Leap Forward, and he recalls eating leftovers discarded by his schoolteachers as a child. "I grew up in the time of the planned economy, when good food and meat was only available on special occasions," he said. Now he competes in a country where 30 percent of the adult population is overweight and nearly 13 percent considered obese, according to state-run media. "Completely disgusting," one online commentator wrote under an article about a recent contest. Pan realized that he had an eating talent when he took on a female Japanese eater in 2006.

Even though he lost, he consumed a mountain of noodles, followed by 36 sticky rice cakes. "That was the moment I realized I could eat three kilograms of noodles," he said matter-of-factly. "Since then my ability has increased significantly, because I purposefully eat at self-service buffets." A former meat factory worker but now unemployed,



LIUYANG: This picture shows Pan Yizhong reacting as he eats a worm during an eating race in Liuyang in China's central province of Hunan. — AFP

he keeps in shape by swimming in a river near his home. "For us big stomach kings, you have to use up a lot of calories, or you'll get fat," he said. Before competitions he does not eat for 24 hours, "so my stomach is empty, and I feel hungry".

Faintly visible food oil stains

China has a long history of big eaters, with accounts of an 18th century minister eating 36

bowls of rice in a contest with an army general, while records say a legal official, Xu Ganxue, ate 50 bread buns and 100 eggs in one sitting a century earlier. But the US and Japan are the reigning centres for the practice, with the former hosting dozens of events every year where competitors known as "gurgitators" gulp down enormous amounts of hot-dogs, burgers, pies and pancakes.

The activity has given rise to its own lexicon—stuffing food in one's mouth ahead of swallowing is known as "chipmunking", and "reversals" are displays of vomiting, which generally entail disqualification. Doctors warn that it could be dangerous, with a 2007 paper in the American Journal of Roentgenology saying that competitors expand their stomachs over time and run the risk of turning the organ into an "enormous sac incapable of shrinking to its original size".

Pan believes he is no match for top competitors such as Joey Chestnut—an American who recently ate 69 hot dog buns in 10 minutes—as there are few regular contests in China.

US competitions can feature prize funds worth thousands of dollars, but Pan is paid small amounts by local restaurants hoping to drum up trade. "I don't make much money," he laments.

At the kung fu school in Liuyang, in central China's Hunan province, he ate just under 40 bowls of noodles, short of his record, but topped them off by swallowing a plate of live, squirming, worms. Wearing a bandana reading "Big Stomach King" and a cycling jacket with faintly visible food oil stains, he grimaced as the invertebrates writhed between his teeth. "I have to clean my own clothes, and I'm not good at it," he said. "I live alone because it's hard to find a partner when you have this profession." — AFP