

REFUGEES' ILLNESS IS LINKED TO MILK

JUN 6 1975

Guam Food-Poisoning of 110 Called First Such Incident

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

Military and Public Health Service doctors are investigating an outbreak of food-poisoning among Vietnamese refugees on Guam.

About 110 Vietnamese refugees were hospitalized last Friday for the sudden onset of nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, but no further cases of illness have occurred since then, according to Public Health Service officials.

An epidemiological investigation has implicated "a commercial dried milk product" that had been inadequately refrigerated during an eight-hour period overnight between the time when food handlers added water to the powder and the time of its serving, Dr. Michael H. Merson, an epidemiologist at the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, said in a telephone interview.

Apparently the milk was reconstituted several hours earlier than recommendations called for.

Because the symptoms developed about two hours after the Vietnamese patients had drunk the milk at the same meal, Dr. Merson said that the team of investigators suspected a toxin produced by staphylococcal bacteria as the cause of the outbreak.

The source of the staphylococcal bacteria has not been determined.

The outbreak of presumed staphylococcal food-poisoning is the first known incident among the more than 110,000 refugees who have been fed since they were evacuated from Southeast Asia at the end of April.

Health officials not connected with the refugee program have credited the military and Public Health Service with doing an exemplary job in preventing outbreaks of infections and food-poisonings that can become epidemic when people live in crowded areas such as the refugee camps.

About 2,000 refugees have been flown to Indiantown Gap, Pa., over recent days as military officials aim to decrease the refugee population on Guam from 45,000 to about 25,000 by June 10.

The size of Guam's refugee population is being reduced because of the threat of typhoons and because the safe water and sewage capacities of the island have been strained by the influx of the refugees, Dr. Robert Van Hoek said in a

separate telephone interview.

Dr. Van Hoek is acting administrator of the Health Services Administration and coordinator of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's role in refugee health care.

The Air Force has sprayed Guam three times with malathion to reduce the population of Aedes mosquitos that can spread a viral infection called dengue fever. Several cases were diagnosed among refugees who had acquired their infections in Vietnam.

The latest application was

made after doctors on Guam had made clinical diagnoses of dengue fever in two Vietnamese patients. However, laboratory tests on one patient did not confirm the diagnosis and tests were pending on the other patient.

Nine cases of typhoid fever have been diagnosed among the refugees. Dr. Merson said there was no evidence to suggest that these cases had resulted from exposure to a common source, which happened in the staphylococcal food-poisoning outbreak now under investigation.