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Congress wrangles over funding for Zika research

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While such Capitol Hill visits are part of the budget process, the looming virus adds a new urgency to the proceedings—though not necessarily enough to deter controversy.

Senator Roy Blunt, a Missouri Republican and chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations health subcommittee, began Thursday's hearing by asking about emergency funding Congress provided to address the Ebola crisis.

"After the Department of Health and Human Services received \$2.7 billion to spend on Ebola and other infectious diseases, more than half remains unspent, and none of the remaining funding thus far has been used for the current Zika outbreak," he said. "This shows the fundamental problem in our public health system: it has a short attention span. We immediately forget about the outbreak that came before and do not adequately plan for the ones on the horizon."

"Ebola isn't over," said Dr Tom Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who explained the Administration's Zika funding request along with Dr Anthony S Fauci, director of the National Institutes of Health's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

Frieden said about 100 CDC staff stationed in West Africa conducted 10 000 tests for Ebola last month and discovered a new case that required an intensive investigation in "a very challenging environment." He told the committee that the Ebola funds are "fully committed" and funding for Zika is a separate matter.

"This is about finding things like Zika before they become problems," he said. "We do need urgently to

both not let down our guard against the threats we know and strengthen the systems so that we don't always have to address things that we might have been able to find earlier."

About \$200 million of the \$1.8 billion requested would go to the NIH and Food and Drug Administration to develop a Zika vaccine. When Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander asked how long that could take, Dr Fauci said the agency is "engaging pharmaceutical companies right now."

Last month, NIAID notified researchers of its interest in supporting research and product development to combat the virus.

Phase 1 trials could begin by the end of the summer to determine if a vaccine is safe and if it triggers a protective immune response, Fauci said. By the end of 2016, phase 2 trial could start if there are still enough people at risk for infection, with results expected in six to eight months.

Frieden confirmed that the mosquito-borne virus has been detected in the brain tissue of infants who died after developing microcephaly, a usually rare birth defect among newborns that causes an abnormally small head and can result in developmental delays, seizures, hearing loss and other problems. However, only about 20 percent of people infected show symptoms of the illness, which typically include fever, rash, joint pain, and conjunctivitis.

As of February 10, 52 cases of the virus have been reported in 18 states and Puerto Rico among US travelers who visited countries where transmission has been confirmed, according to the CDC. Another nine cases of locally-acquired cases have been confirmed in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands.

