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HEPATITIS A OUTBREAK STRIKES ALASKANS

Between August and December 1986, 75 cases of confirmed hepatitis A were reported to the Epidemiology Office. Of these 75 cases, 41 (56%) were located in Anchorage, 17 (23%) in Fairbanks, 4 (5%) in Juneau, and 13 (17%) from seven other Alaskan communities. Of the 75 cases, 59 (79%) occurred in adults. These 75 cases represented a dramatic increase over the number of hepatitis A cases reported during the first half of 1986 and the last 3 years (Figure). In all, 104 cases of hepatitis A were reported in 1986.

- Of 41 cases among Anchorage residents, 37 were confirmed since October 4, 1986.
22 were male, 19 were female.
11 were Native, 30 were non-Native.
36 were adults, 5 were children.
- Of the 36 adults, 30 (83%) were between the ages 20 and 39 (Table 1).
- Of 22 cases fully interviewed for risk factors, 17 (77%) admitted drug use, either IV or marijuana; only 3 (14%) had children less than 6.
- Although eight small clusters of individuals with hepatitis A were identified, no common source was found.
- Of the 41 Anchorage cases, at least 21 lived in midtown or downtown. Other cases were scattered throughout town.

A similar outbreak of hepatitis A in the drug community was recognized 18 months ago in the State of Washington and is continuing. Several other states including Connecticut, Oregon, and Oklahoma have also reported outbreaks in this same risk group. Questions concerning parenteral transmission of hepatitis A through use of shared needles and IV drugs remain unanswered. Samples of marijuana provided to the Division of Public Health for testing have shown massive fecal contamination and may be implicated in transmission. Further investigation will be necessary to confirm this finding.

A major concern is that hepatitis A may be introduced into rural Alaska. Once established, the disease may be difficult to control, as it proved to be in the past.

It is imperative that all physicians and other health care providers request the proper serologic tests on all suspected cases of hepatitis. Hepatitis screening is available through the state lab. All physicians and other health care providers should immediately report, by phone, any suspected cases of hepatitis to our office so that we can interview all new cases.

(Reported by Ronald Boisen, M.D.)

Table 1
Hepatitis A cases Anchorage by Age, Sex, Race
August - December, 1986
N=41

| Age Group | Native | | Non-Native | | Total |
|-----------|--------|--------|------------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | |
| 0-4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 5-9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| 10-14 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 15-19 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 20-29 | 3 | 3 | 11 | 6 | 23 |
| 30-39 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| 40-49 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| >50 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 5 | 6 | 17 | 13 | 41 |

Hepatitis A in Alaska, 1983-1986
N = 188

