



Bulletin No. 20  
December 4, 2001

Anthrax Mail Scare Prompts Testing  
All Tests Negative for Anthrax in Alaska

Since recognition of human disease linked to anthrax-tainted U.S. mail,<sup>1</sup> state health departments and laboratories have been evaluating and testing suspicious letters, packages and substances for anthrax. In coordination with the State Emergency Coordination Center (SECC), the Alaska State Troopers (AST), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Anchorage Police (APD), Anchorage Fire Department, numerous local law enforcement agencies and local fire departments throughout the state, the Alaska Division of Public Health developed protocols to quickly respond to calls from concerned citizens around the state.

As of November 14, 2001, SECC had received 104 calls from 29 towns and villages reporting potential anthrax exposures. Towns receiving the majority of calls included Anchorage (43), Juneau (11), and Fairbanks (7). Of these 104 calls, 83 required further investigations by authorities, resulting in the State Laboratory - Anchorage testing 56 letters, packages, and substances and 25 human specimens from around the state. **All of the 81 samples were negative for anthrax.**

**Human Specimens:** Seven incidents resulted in 25 humans being tested. Three incidents involved exposure to suspicious letters. In separate incidents, two individuals visited their physician complaining of suspicious lesions. Autopsy specimens from two unexplained deaths were also evaluated. All 25 human specimens were negative for anthrax.

**Suspicious Letters and Packages:** Twenty-eight letters and packages were evaluated, including 13 in which a white powder was reported. Suspicious letters or packages were received by governmental agencies, military installations, schools, retail stores, hospitals and private individuals. Two letters contained notes with actual threat language. Packages tested included sweaters from a Middle Eastern country received at a local retail store, school books, religious tracts from overseas, boxes processed through the Brentwood Mail Facility, a videotape from a New York office and a package labeled "sea salt".

**White Powders:** White powders were discovered in or on numerous items besides letters and packages. Examples included rolls of coins, a suitcase, keyboards, a newspaper vending machine, airplane seat, bus seat, moving van, souvenir pipe, and commercial apples. White powder was also found at various locations such as public restrooms, library cubicle, courthouse, air hangar, post office, hospital, hotel, and a pharmacy. Two of these incidents also included threatening notes warning the finder that the powder was anthrax.

Firefighters and HAZMAT teams responded to several incidents, where, in at least three instances, decontamination procedures were conducted. These involved partial or complete evacuations of federal agencies, schools, homes and commercial sites. These events also caused the grounding of two planes and removal of a municipal bus from service until testing could be completed.

**Discussion:** Most of the incidents were reported by citizens with legitimate concerns about exposure to suspicious letters, packages or substances. Local, state and federal law enforcement agencies responded to all of these incidents to quickly assess the potential for a bioterrorism connection and to help transport the specimens to the state lab for testing. **All testing to date has been negative for anthrax.**

As of December 1, 23 cases of human anthrax (11 confirmed inhalation, 7 confirmed and 5 suspect cutaneous) have been identified in the U.S. since the events of September 11. Five people have died. All cases but two have been definitively linked to anthrax-tainted letters mailed from New Jersey during September and October. No attempts to disseminate anthrax in the U.S. other than through the mail have been identified.

Four incidents in Alaska contained false threat statements. These involved a letter, a package and two white powders found with threatening notes. Hoaxes take considerable time to evaluate, waste valuable resources and take time away from other important public safety and public health activities. The U.S. Senate recently introduced legislation making it a federal offense punishable by 5 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine to make a false terrorist threat or to report such a threat.

Procedures for individuals to identify, report and handle suspicious letters, packages or other items have been published.<sup>2</sup> Individuals finding such items should place them on a nearby counter or floor, leave the area, prevent others from entering, call local law enforcement and wash their hands. Law enforcement officials in consultation with the Section of Epidemiology will assess the incident and determine if testing is needed.

Letters and packages with valid return addresses (i.e., bills, expected packages, and catalogues) are low risk and generally will not be accepted for testing. Human testing associated with a potential exposure is generally not necessary; when deemed a potential risk, the suspect letter, package or substance will be tested first. Health care providers who are evaluating individuals with suspicious lesions or symptoms of anthrax are encouraged to consult with the Section of Epidemiology. Testing will be arranged through the State Laboratory - Anchorage.

### Recommendations

1. Individuals should remain vigilant for suspicious letters and packages and notify local law enforcement of any found. Letters with valid return addresses or packages that were ordered and expected are low risk and usually will not be accepted for testing.
2. Individuals should consider discarding without opening any unsolicited mail that they do not want and that is not suspicious.
3. Health care providers should immediately report any potential cases of human anthrax to the Section of Epidemiology at 907-269-8000 during business hours or 800-478-0084 after hours. Staff will advise on recommended samples to obtain and help expedite samples to the state lab for immediate testing.

4. Health care providers may find information about diagnosis and treatment of anthrax as well as other issues about bioterrorism at the web site; <http://www.epi.hss.state.ak.us>.

#### **References**

1. Update: Investigation of Bioterrorism-Related Anthrax, 2001. *MMWR* 2001; 50(45): 1008-1010.
2. Section of Epidemiology. Responding to Anthrax Threats: Recommendations for Handling Suspicious Letters and Packages. *Bulletin* No. 15, October 23, 2001.

(We thank the SECC, State Laboratory - Anchorage, AST, APD, FBI and all the local police and fire departments for their quick responses to these incidents. Contributed by Sue Anne Jenkerson, RNC, MSN, FNP Section of Epidemiology.)