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Recovery Raises Health Concerns

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As New York enters Day Five of its terrorist catastrophe, health and police officials are stepping up efforts to protect the living and deal with the dead.

Rescuers are racing the clock, trying to disinter bodies before rot sets in, which could be a source of disease and render body parts unidentifiable.

Friday's cool rains, which could promote decay, raised worries about the status of the bodies and the safety of rescuers.

"I don't think it's an urgent public health issue as much as it is a search and recovery issue," New York City Health Commissioner Neal Cohen told Newsday. "I know it impacts on the time it will take to execute recovery."

But as time goes by, Cohen said, "longer range we have to look at water as a potential source for [health] concerns. And we're going to address it."

Concerns about infectious diseases — both in terms of rotting bodies and potential bioterrorism — have led health officials to create an aggressive citywide disease surveillance net. And fears that radiation from medical equipment may be in the rubble have prompted special surveys around ground zero.

The city Health Department and the medical examiner's office have been supplemented with federal and regional staff. On Friday, 34 Epidemic Intelligence Service officers arrived from the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta to help track city disease trends. A CDC officer will be posted in each major hospital in the city.

The Health Department is leading this effort from a slapdash setup inside the old Public Health Laboratories Building at First Avenue and 26th Street, having been forced to abandon its downtown facilities Tuesday.

Across the street, outside the medical examiner's office, somber-faced police officers, wearing medical garb over their uniforms, huddle outside the facility on First Avenue.

These officers, as well as detectives and correction officers, are assigned to perhaps the worst job in the operation: morgue detail.

While relatives of the missing fill out detailed missing-persons reports at the city armory, the morgue detail undertakes the grim process of attempting to identify the bodies.

Because of the nature of the work, the officers will be rotated.

"It's a day-by-day thing," a police official said. "You have to understand that people will lose their minds doing this. Even the cop who has 20 years on the job, who has been at homicide scenes, can't do this day after day."

Items removed from the body are all cataloged, placed in evidence bags and marked.

Officials at the temporary morgues are coming across a large number of tiny body parts, police sources said. In one case, they cataloged a lung.

A more hopeful mood prevails at the Health Department, where, so far, worst-case scenarios have not played out. There is no evidence of bioterrorism, Dr. Marcelle Layton said, though her surveillance team remains on alert for such agents as anthrax, smallpox and plague.

City health workers, along with the recently arrived CDC scientists, are monitoring every hospital in the five boroughs for unusual disease trends. In particular, they are looking for signs of clusters of encephalitis, pneumonia, respiratory disease and acute neurological problems.

"We are most concerned about those brave souls who have to be down there 24 hours a day, in rescue operations, and will be for weeks to come," said Layton, who normally heads the city's infectious diseases department. "We are starting today to set up a special surveillance to look at diseases in those [rescue] groups."

Dr. Patrick Meehan, director of the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health, arrived Friday to assist Layton. He said the key disease concerns for rescue workers are blood-borne pathogens, such as hepatitis and HIV. To prevent exposure, Meehan said, all rescue workers should wear latex gloves, goggles and hepafilter masks.

Another potentially serious problem is radioactivity from medical devices that were in the buildings, said the city's Associate Health Commissioner Kelly McKinney. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission flew radiation surveillance missions over the area Thursday, finding nothing worrisome. But nevertheless McKinney said the health department will step up radiation monitoring Saturday.



Newsday Photo / Jiro Osel
Rescue workers lift a body from the rubble at the World Trade Center Thursday.

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