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STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE, MONDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2001

3 more being treated for anthrax in city

■ All are connected with NBC case, but none diagnosed with the disease; people continue to be wary of new mail

By SARA KUGLER
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Americans returning to work faced anxious moments opening envelopes after the number of people across the nation exposed to anthrax sent through the mail jumped over the weekend.

Three new cases — a police officer and two lab technicians involved in an investigation at NBC's New York headquarters — tested positive for the bacteria, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said yesterday. Nevada officials said four people who may have come into contact with a contaminated letter at a Microsoft office tested negative, while results weren't known for two others.

The new New York cases brought to 12 the number of people around the nation who either have anthrax or been exposed to it. That does not include an NBC employee who is taking antibiotics after displaying possible symptoms of the disease.

Reports over the weekend said emergency rooms were flooded with people seeking anthrax tests and police have responded to numerous reports of suspicious letters and packages, including at least two on Staten Island yesterday that were turned over to police.

The recipients of the letters told the Advance they thought the envelopes were suspicious because they didn't have return addresses. Neither person opened their letter before turning them in to authorities. Police would not say

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if they had collected more such envelopes during the weekend.

In New York, Giuliani said the officer and two technicians were exposed while working on the anthrax case involving Erin O'Connor, 38, the assistant to NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw. O'Connor is expected to recover.

"There's a very strict lab protocol in place, but what may have happened here, it's possible they may not have fit their masks properly around their noses and mouths," said Sandra Mullin, a health department spokeswoman.

O'Connor was exposed when she opened a letter, containing a brown granular substance, that was mailed to Brokaw from Trenton, N.J. It was postmarked Sept. 18, one week after terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Federal officials in New Jersey interviewed postal workers and watched surveillance videotapes Sunday as part of their efforts to trace the letter. Postal Service officials believed it could have been mailed from one of 46 post offices, FBI Special Agent Sandra Carroll said.

"It's very complex and a very comprehensive investigation that's a lot like looking for a needle in a haystack," Carroll said yesterday.

At first, O'Connor thought she had thrown away the letter, but remembered it Friday while being interviewed, New York postal inspector Peter Nash said yesteray.

Investigators had initially focused on a second letter — postmarked in St. Petersburg, Fla. — as the likely source of the anthrax.

Giuliani said the police officer had the bacteria in his nose, as did one lab technician. Another technician had a spore on her face. Both work for the city health department, which conducted the tests.

Exposure to the spores does not mean infection and the three are expected to be fine, Giuliani said. Their identities were not released.

"I think twice about opening my mail," said Steve Blum, 54, of Boca Raton, Fla. He said he will discard letters from someone he does not recognize. "You also have to worry about copycats."

The anthrax scare began Oct. 4 when it was confirmed that a Florida tabloid editor had contracted the inhaled form of the bacteria. He later died, the first such death in the United States since 1976.

Seven other employees of American Media Inc. have tested positive for exposure and are being treated with antibiotics. None have developed the disease. A second round of blood tests for more than 300 of the company's employees is expected this week.

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In Washington, Attorney General John Ashcroft said it was premature "to decide whether there is a direct link" to Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, but "we should consider this potential that it is linked."

News of the exposures has caused jitters around the world, with a number of false or pending cases reported over the weekend. Among them:

In Hawaii, hazardous-materials teams were called to the Honolulu and Lihue airports following the discovery of white powder at both locations. Tests were being conducted on the powder.

In Uniontown, Pa., a 49-year-old woman was given Cipro, an antibiotic for anthrax, and was tested for exposure after receiving an envelope containing a powdery substance. She was later released from a hospital.

In Spartanburg, S.C., an unidentified white powder found in an audiocassette returned to the Spartanburg County Library forced the main branch to be shut down for more than two hours. The FBI is investigating.

In England, several hundred people were evacuated from Canterbury Cathedral after a worker said he saw a man dropping a white powder in one of the chapels. Workers wearing chemical protection suits cleared up the powder and took samples for analysis.

In Nevada, where a letter sent to a Microsoft office in Reno contained pornographic pictures contaminated with anthrax, officials said tests of four people who may have been exposed proved negative for the bacteria.

Results for two others were pending, with results of those nasal swab tests likely known today, said Washoe County health officer Barbara Hunt.

The six people tested included five Microsoft workers and a family member.

"We're obviously relieved to hear that four of the employees who were tested, their tests came back negative," Microsoft spokesman Matt Pilla said. "It sounds like the other two may come back negative as well. That's obviously great news."

State officials have sent the pornographic pictures to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta for further testing.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said he would ask Congress for more than $1.5 billion to take steps to counter bioterrorism threats. Some of the money would be used to purchase enough antibiotics to treat 12 million people for 60 days, six times the current supply.

(Advance City Hall reporter Reginald Patrick contributed to this report.)

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