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No anthrax source found at ABC yet

■ Officials try to pinpoint origin of bacteria that infected the network news producer's infant son

By ALAN CLENDENNING
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Environmental tests were completed yesterday at ABC's headquarters to try to pinpoint the anthrax source that infected a network news producer's infant son, but it could be days before results are known.

ABC spokesman Todd Polkes said the boy and his mother spent time in news offices on the West 66th Street building's second floor and editing facilities on the third floor while they attended a birthday party last month for another employee.

Those areas were sealed off yesterday but the two did not visit the studio where ABC's "World News Tonight" is broadcast, so the network can continue operating there, Polkes said. The child was hospitalized but has since been released.

ABC News President David Westin has said the boy developed the skin form of anthrax after spending time at the newsroom last month. The child is taking antibiotics and is expected to recover.

More than 200 ABC employees were interviewed by investigators. While they were not tested directly for anthrax or put on antibiotics — because authorities have not discovered the anthrax source — nasal swabs were taken from 100 employees identified as having had contact with the baby or having been in the affected areas.

More employees may be tested based on what investigators learn from the interviews.

The nasal swabs do not give a reliable indication of whether any individual is infected with anthrax; the test helps determine who may have been in the vicinity of any spores.

The ABC building "is the focus of the investigation but it's not clear whether that's where the exposure took place," said Sandra Mullin, spokeswoman for the city's health department.

Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani said officials were still testing a number of media mailrooms around Manhattan yesterday after the

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tests began Monday. Initial tests of some mailrooms were negative, he said. Among the news organizations tested were The Associated Press, CNN, CBS, Fox, Daily News and New York Post.

Officials at The New York Times said tests had turned up negative for 32 employees tested for anthrax. Last week Times reporter Judith Miller - who wrote a best-selling book on bioterrorism — received a letter containing a white substance which tested negative for anthrax.

About 10 newsroom and mailroom employees at the New York office of Bloomberg LP, a business news service, were sent to a hospital yesterday for anthrax testing after an employee handled a letter with suspicious brown material on or inside the envelope, said company spokeswoman Chris Taylor.

The envelope, which was being tested, was addressed to the female broadcast news employee, Taylor said. The area where the woman works was sealed off, but that did not affect broadcast operations.

In New Jersey, authorities said yesterday three letters mailed to NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw mentioned anthrax in the text, including one that actually was tainted with the disease's spores.

The letter containing the bacteria that infected Brokaw's assistant was addressed by hand. That letter was postmarked from Trenton on Sept. 16.

A second NBC employee who handled the letter has tested negative for anthrax, though authorities are still waiting for results of a final test, said Dr. Neal Cohen, the city's health commissioner.

The letter that infected Brokaw's assistant with the skin form of anthrax was addressed by hand. It was postmarked Sept. 16 and it came from Trenton, the same origin of an anthrax-contaminated letter that was sent Oct. 8 to the Washington office of Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

Late yesterday, Giuliani said that the city's 28,000 postal employees will have the option of wearing latex gloves and masks. The mayor also said that the U.S. Postal Service would launch a public awareness campaign next week, mailing postcards to 128 million addresses nationwide, telling people to look out for letters with no return address and other signs.

As for other anthrax scares, Police Commissioner Bernard Kerik said yesterday the 911 system received another 51 calls and police gave 11 more packages to the Health Department for investigation, bringing the total to 35 packages under scrutiny.

Health and police officials won't say whether any of the packages originated on Staten Island.

As the flu season begins here, feeling lethargic or under the weather can be signs New Yorkers have a cold or flu, Dr. Cohen said. "They shouldn't jump to the conclusion that they've been exposed to bioterrorism."

Giuliani said yesterday that fewer people are visiting emergency rooms, and "things seem to be more normal."

Meanwhile, there were signs at City Hall that an election is, in fact, fast approaching.

The city's Board of Elections voted not to extend the Nov. 6 election by two weeks. Five members, including Staten Island Republican Michael Cilmi, supported the extension, and five, including Island Democrat Mark Herman, were opposed. Since the vote was tied, no action was taken.

Arguing for the need to begin the transition process right away, mayoral candidate Mark Green yesterday assembled a group of Democratic finance experts to discuss his new budget advisory panel, which will help craft a post-tragedy financial plan for the city, including asking for more state aid and "bonding" out the debt over a series of years.

Comptroller Alan Hevesi, a former mayoral candidate who lost in the Democratic primary, is on the panel. He has estimated damages from the World Trade Center attack to be more than $100 billion, including $34 billion in property damage and possibly $60 billion in lost jobs and other economic costs.

Advance staff writers Reginald Patrick and Heidi Singer contributed to this report.

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