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N.J. Mail Carrier, CBS Employee Have Anthrax

No New Cases Are Reported On Capitol Hill

By JOHN LANCASTER and HELEN DEWAR
Washington Post Staff Writers

A New Jersey postal worker and an assistant to CBS News anchor Dan Rather have contracted the skin form of anthrax, bringing to six the number of people known to have been infected by the bacterium in a series of bioterrorist attacks, federal health authorities said yesterday.

The news came as congressional leaders and the Bush administration—after days of confusion and mixed messages—launched a campaign to contain public anxiety about the mysterious anthrax-contaminated letters sent to news outlets in New York and apparently Florida as well as the Capitol office of Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.).

Last night, a second New Jersey postal worker also was reported to show symptoms of skin anthrax, which would bring the total number of known infections to seven. Federal health officials also said they are investigating several other possible cases of anthrax linked to New York and Florida.

In Washington, where the House and three Senate office buildings have been closed since Wednesday afternoon, officials announced with evident relief that the number of people who show evidence of exposure to anthrax—which does not mean they will fall ill—has not increased from the 31 congressional and law enforcement personnel who had been identified.

They said, however, that anyone who spent time Monday on the fifth or sixth floor of the Hart Building's southeast quadrant, near Daschle's fifth-floor office, should take Cipro for the next two months as a precaution.

Since the anthrax was discovered Monday, about 3,000 people—some of whom were nowhere near the Hart Building that day—have lined up for nasal swabs that can determine the presence of anthrax spores, though not actual infection. As of yesterday afternoon, results were in for 878 tests, all of them negative, officials said. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised that no further medical screening is required for those who were outside the so-called exposure zone near Daschle's office.

"I'm very upbeat, very optimistic," Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), the Senate's only physician, told reporters at an afternoon briefing with federal health officials. "People are working together in a harmonious, almost symphonic way."

But containing the anthrax scare proved easier said than done amid a spate of new reports, most of them false alarms and hoaxes, but all of them taken seriously in the new climate of vigilance.

The story even took an international turn yesterday when health authorities in Kenya disclosed that a letter mailed from Atlanta to a private home in Nairobi tested positive for anthrax, the first confirmed case beyond U.S. borders since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. They did not identify the man and offered no explanation as to why he might have received the letter.

The most striking developments, however, occurred at home, where authorities were scrambling to determine the implications of two new confirmed cases in New York and New Jersey.

The discovery that a mail carrier in West Trenton, N.J., had contracted cutaneous anthrax was especially significant because two of the anthrax letters—one to Daschle and the other to NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw—were postmarked in Trenton. Authorities speculate that at least one of the letters may have passed through the unidentified mail carrier's hands, and thus may have originated in West Trenton.

Across the Hudson River in New York, the anthrax attacks reached a third network yesterday as CBS disclosed that an assistant to Rather had developed the cutaneous form of the disease.

The prognosis is considered excellent for Claire Fletcher, 27, who does not recall opening any suspicious letter addressed to Rather, although investigators are assuming that the spores came through the mail. Fletcher initially developed symptoms in early October, around the same time as an assistant to Brokaw and the baby of an ABC producer.

Initial tests on Fletcher were negative, and it was not until the publicity surrounding the ABC case prompted her to get a biopsy for a face blemish that she was diagnosed with anthrax. Rather called her "heroic" but said he had no plans to be tested himself. "She's fine," Rather said, describing her as a triathlete who already has resumed training. "Our biggest problem isn't anthrax. It's fear."

A team of federal and local investigators is canvassing the building for traces of the bacteria. Steven Ostroff, the CDC's chief epidemiologist, said the strain of the CBS News employee's anthrax is similar to the strain that infected an aide to Brokaw.

"By all appearances, the patterns appear to be very similar," he said, adding "there's no danger for people to continue working" in the network's building, known as CBS Broadcast Center.

At NBC, tests of about 850 employees' nasal passages have returned negative, said Sandra Mullin, of the New York City Department of Health.

Public health investigators completed environmental sampling of ABC News' Upper West Side headquarters. So far, none of those samples—taken from desks, bookcases and other furniture—have tested positive. Mullin said voluntary testing of network employees' nasal passages is ongoing. None have tested positive, she said.

Testing of environmental samples taken from New York Gov. George E. Pataki's office in Manhattan, where anthrax spores were discovered Wednesday, is to resume today.

New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani tried to allay New Yorkers' fears by stressing that the threat of anthrax in the city remains minor. "People should not overreact to this," he told reporters in his morning news briefing. "The worst case scenario if you get it, this disease is treatable."

The city's health department yesterday received about 300 calls from

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citizens regarding anthrax concerns, down from 800 Wednesday and 1,000 Saturday. Mullin said the new demands have strained the department's services. "We've certainly had a considerable increase in demand for services. But we've been very fortunate" to have been assisted by more than a dozen epidemiologists dispatched by the CDC, she said.

The cutaneous form of the disease is less serious than the inhaled, or pulmonary variety, which killed Florida photo editor Robert Stevens this month at the beginning of the anthrax scare. Ernesto Blanco, 73, one of Stevens's colleagues at American Media Inc. in Boca Raton, also has inhalation anthrax, but he was reported yesterday to be recovering.

In Burlington, Vt., State Health Commissioner Jan Carney advised 60 passengers who had arrived on a Northwest flight from Detroit to begin antibiotic treatment as a precaution after powder was found on checked baggage that was being removed from the cargo hold, the Associated Press reported. Carney, citing preliminary tests, said the powder contained a rod-shaped bacteria related to anthrax, although she thought it "unlikely" that the presence of anthrax would be confirmed.

In Nevada, officials announced that final tests had come back negative for a letter from Malaysia to a Microsoft office in Reno that had prompted concern.

In Florida, traces of anthrax were detected at two more postal facilities and employees at a supermarket tabloid company awaited the results of a second round of blood tests.

As the number of anthrax cases has proliferated, administration officials have been stung by criticism that the government lacks a unified plan for dealing with bioterrorism and has fueled public anxiety with confusing or inaccurate information. Administration officials went to great pains yesterday to reassure the public, while at the same time they reiterated warnings of harsh penalties for those who engage in hoaxes, such as a Rhode Island man who was charged with mailing a letter that falsely purported to contain anthrax.

On Capitol Hill, congressional leaders and federal officials gave a generally optimistic assessment. "We continue to receive good news," with no evidence of new exposures or contamination of the ventilation system, Deputy Surgeon General Kenneth Moritsugu said.

The number of people showing evidence of exposure remains 31, Moritsugu said. The rest of the 278 nasal swabs taken on Monday were negative, as were the 600 swabs that have been analyzed so far from the 1,400 that were taken on Tuesday. Analyses of the remaining swabs are continuing. A total of 3,000 swabs have been taken so far, officials said.

A "thorough environmental sweep of the Capitol complex," including all its buildings, began Wednesday and continued through the night and through Thursday, Moritsugu said. The sweeps are being conducted by the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Areas have already been swept in the Capitol, Dirksen Senate Office Building, the Ford House Office Building and the Capitol police facility where all Capitol mail and deliveries go through security screening.

The sweeps will continue "over the next several days" in other areas of the Capitol complex, he said, and additional samples from the ventilation system have been taken and are being analyzed.

Roger Gibbs, from the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, said surface samples were taken first, tracing the mail all the way back to its point of origin at the police screening facility. Air tests also are being conducted, he said.

Authorities will wait to get further results before deciding whether to resume operations in the buildings on Monday, Frist said. "Certainly if we start finding some positive results, we're not going to reopen buildings and expose folks." He said areas that are suspected of the highest contamination are being tested first, with those of lower priority being tested later.

A concentrated form of bleach may be used in cases of contamination, he said, but not in other areas where there is no risk. No decontamination will be done until the tests are completed.

Later in the afternoon, Daschle came to the Senate floor to repeat the finding and advise colleagues "unequivocally" that, despite rumors, no member of the Senate leadership had tested positive for anthrax exposure. Daschle had not been in his Hart office at the time of the exposure but was tested because he had come in contact with some of his Hart staffers afterward.

In editions that go on sale today, the National Enquirer and the Star offer details of the anthrax attack on their Boca Raton headquarters. Boasting of a "World Exclusive," the Enquirer offers first-person accounts "from the people who lived through the nightmare. Their stories can save your life." It also tells the tale of Scooby Doo, a poodle that tagged along to the office with his editor owner and is now taking antibiotics to thwart anthrax.

The newspapers report their theory that Stevens, who died of anthrax poisoning Oct. 5, studied a curious love letter that reached the building about Sept. 19, intended for pop star Jennifer Lopez. The accounts provide varying details, but they agree that a news assistant opened the large envelope and found objects, including a folded letter that held powder and professed true love.

According to the reports, Stevens took the letter and peered at it closely, possibly breathing enough powdery anthrax to kill him. Investigators are skeptical. They are confident that a letter carried the anthrax that infected Stevens, but they discount the Lopez missive as an unlikely source, citing interviews with newspaper staff and the fact that none of the other staffers who handled the letter have tested positive for anthrax exposure.

Staff writers Steven Gray, Susan Schmidt, David Brown, Peter Slevin, Eric Pianin, Helen Dewar, Juliet Eilperin, Avram Golstein, Dale Russakoff and Karl Vick, and special correspondent Christine Haughney, contributed to this report.

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