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3rd TV network hit with a case of anthrax

Dan Rather aide at CBS is doing fine

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Anthrax moved around the dial yesterday, striking an assistant to CBS anchorman Dan Rather in the latest of a series of apparent attacks on network newsrooms in New York.

The worker, whose duties include opening Rather's mail at his W. 57th St. offices, tested positive for the skin form of the potentially deadly disease yesterday, authorities said.

She does not remember handling any suspicious letters or packages, but health officials suspect she contracted anthrax from a tainted piece of mail.

"She should be all right," Mayor Giuliani said. "No one else at CBS appears to have symptoms."

The woman, a triathlete in her spare time, has been on antibiotics since noticing a swelling on her face two weeks ago. She was at work yesterday and was expected to make a full recovery, officials said.

The CBS case came as two Trenton postal workers tested positive for skin anthrax, raising to seven the number of Americans known to have the disease. The only fatal case was that of a photo editor for a Florida-based newspaper who died Oct. 5 of the inhaled form of the disease.

Rather led his "CBS Nightly News" broadcast with a story about the anthrax outbreak — and ended with a stoic tribute to his assistant. "What happened to a respected and loyal colleague here at CBS News today drove home the point in a very personal way," Rather said. "It has been just over five weeks now since everything changed and the threat of terror in this country became a real part of everyday life."

3rd network victim

The CBS employee is the third person to contract the skin form of anthrax at a network news office in New York.

An assistant to NBC anchorman Tom Brokaw got anthrax, apparently after opening a hate letter last month in the network's Rockefeller Center offices.

The baby son of an ABC producer is believed to have contracted the disease after attending a birthday party in the network's upper West Side newsroom. Anthrax also was detected Wednesday in Gov. Pataki's Manhattan offices.

Rather's assistant noticed a swelling on her face Oct. 1. She went to her doctor a couple days later and was placed on antibiotics. She asked for an anthrax test after news of the NBC case broke last week.

CBS workers mostly took the jarring news in stride. Although taping for some shows was canceled in the morning, a steady stream of people walked in and out of the network headquarters near 11th Ave.

"I remember having a sinking feeling in my stomach when I heard about NBC," said Dennis Stemplinski, 27, of Astoria, Queens, who works for CBS radio news. "Now I'm not as worried."

CBS employee Kristen Logiudice said the attack came as no surprise because of the cases at the other networks.

"We were expecting it," said Logiudice, 24, of Brooklyn. "We're scared for her because we know her, but no one is panicking because we know its treatable."

Meanwhile, Time Inc. fired its mailroom staff and hired an outside firm to handle its mail. A spokesman insisted the move had been in the works for months and was a cost-cutting measure.

More reports, responses

The anthrax scares that have spread across the city continued yesterday, with more reports of powder in subways and offices.

The Red Cross disaster response unit evacuated its offices on Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn Heights at 6 a.m., when a suspicious powder was spotted in a box filled with bottled water.

All workers were back in the building by lunchtime, and there was no immediate word on what the powder was.

"The box was near the coffee area," said Red Cross official Gary Miller. "It could be creamer, sugar. We don't know."

Below ground, police had investigated at least a dozen reports of suspicious packages or substances in the subways.

Local service on the C and B lines was suspended during the morning rush hour at W. 81st St. and Central Park West, and Eighth Ave. trains were rerouted onto Sixth Ave. in midtown. Nothing dangerous was found.

At Public School 191 in Brooklyn, a secretary found suspicious powder inside an envelope yesterday, and authorities were called to test the substance.

An anthrax scare this week at a Harlem school, though, turned out to be much concern about nothing. The powder that spilled onto a teacher Monday was dried envelope glue, said Board of Education spokesman Kevin Ortiz.

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