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TERROR GERMS SICKEN 2 MORE

Anthrax hits CBS News aide and Trenton postal worker

By DAVID SEIFMAN, MARK STAMEY, DAN KADISON and TRACY CONNOR

The anthrax bug stung two more victims yesterday as a CBS News assistant and a New Jersey postal worker tested positive — bringing the number of confirmed infections to six and piling on more evidence the media is a prime target.

Investigators were probing four more suspected cases as the feds announced a $1 million reward and the White House sought to reassure a panicked public.

"We are more vigilant today and continue to get more vigilant every day," Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge said. "I think our antennae are up for all conceivable risks."

The bad day at Black Rock began when an employee who handles mail in CBS anchor Dan Rather's office tested positive for cutaneous anthrax, which is less lethal than the inhaled type.

Claire Fletcher, 27, developed symptoms — swelling on her cheek — on Oct. 1. Treated with penicillin and then Cipro, she has nearly recovered.

An environmental survey at CBS came up clean and no one else is ill.

"The public health risk in the building after several weeks of the likely exposure is essentially negligible," Dr. Stephen Ostroff of the Centers for Disease Control said.

Rather, who described the assistant as a "heroic" triathlete who didn't miss a day of work, said he doesn't plan to get tested.

"Our biggest problem today is not anthrax," he said. "Our biggest problem is fear."

Fletcher's Manhattan roommate said Rather's assistant ultimately wasn't overly surprised by the diagnosis.

"She kind of knew it. It was too much coincidence that she worked for Dan and opened his mail and had a blob on her face," said Marie Huber.

Fortunately, she said, the antibiotics quickly took effect.

"Because she was well, it wasn't all that distressing," Huber said.

Huber said Fletcher, who is English, came down with a headache and symptoms similar to the flu 2½ weeks ago, and then got a lesion on her cheek that at first looked line an insect bite.



MAKING UNWANTED NEWS: "60 Minutes" producer Don Hewitt leaves CBS building yesterday after news of the anthrax attack. Robert Miller

The anthrax crisis has cooked up an alphabet soup of media targets: cases are now linked to CBS, NBC and ABC.

An assistant to NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw was infected after opening a powder-filled letter on Sept. 25. The 7-month-old son of an ABC News producer got sick after a Sept. 28 visit to the office.

In addition, the Florida-based publisher of the National Enquirer and other tabloids was spiked with spores. American Media photo editor Bob Stevens died of the inhaled form Oct. 5 and mailroom worker Ernesto Blanco is hospitalized.

A third tentacle of the sabotage stretched to Washington, where a powder-filled letter was sent to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

The number of people exposed to the spores on Capitol Hill stood at 31 — and the House chamber and three Senate office buildings were closed.

The germ-laced letters sent to Daschle and Brokaw were postmarked in Trenton, and a female mail handler in West Trenton became the sixth confirmed case.

The woman worked on Sept. 18 and Oct. 8, the days the letters were postmarked, and bar codes on the envelopes indicated she may have processed them.

Investigators hoped the woman's case will provide a key clue that narrows down the area in which the spiked letters were mailed.

Officials are "almost certain" a maintenance worker in Trenton's main post office has skin anthrax, too, but tests are pending, Postal Inspector Tony Esposito said.

"Both are doing well," New Jersey Acting Gov. Donald DiFrancesco said.

In another sign that the crisis is far from over, the Centers for Disease Control said probers are looking into four more suspected cases beyond the six confirmed patients.

In a series of briefings, the government tried to find a balance between warning and alarming the jittery public.

The Postal Service said it will send guidelines for handling suspicious mail to every home, while the FBI put up a $1 million reward for information leading to the culprits.

At the same time, officials emphasized that the number of anthrax cases is small, the disease is not contagious and there is no evidence of a link to organized terrorism.

Meanwhile, in Nevada, officials said CDC tests turned up no anthrax in a found in a letter sent to a Microsoft office there.

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