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THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2001

Sorting Machines at Mail Center Are Contaminated

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

The Postal Service announced yesterday that laboratory tests had found anthrax contamination at four high-speed sorting machines at the largest mail distribution center in New York City.

Postal authorities said the machines were evidently contaminated by anthrax-laced letters that might have been sent from Trenton, N.J., sorted at Morgan Station and then delivered to NBC and The New York Post, where workers have contracted anthrax of the skin.

Postal officials cordoned off the section of the center where the machines are situated, but the union representing the 5,500 workers at the station demanded that the whole building be shut down.

"This building must be closed," said William Smith, president of the New York Metro Area Postal Union. "If they don't close it, we're going to go to court. Who wants to go into that building when there might be anthrax bacteria in other areas?"

Mr. Smith said that Morgan Station, which covers two full city blocks, should be closed just as the Postal Service closed sorting centers in Washington and Hamilton Township, N.J., after workers there were infected with anthrax.



Photographs by Angel Franco/The New York Times

Kerry Brooks, a worker at the Morgan Station mail distribution center at 29th Street and Ninth Avenue, with his supply of Cipro. Anthrax contamination was found yesterday at four sorting machines at the center.

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But Robert Trombley, a Postal Service spokesman, insisted that there was no need to close all of Morgan Station, which is at 29th Street and Ninth Avenue and often processes two million pieces of mail daily. "We have different situations between New Jersey and here," Mr. Trombley said. "To date, there have been no reported symptoms of anthrax at any post office east of New Jersey."

The Postal Service has begun random testing on workers from the Morgan Station, but so far no test results have been announced.

In another development in Manhattan yesterday, the city Health Department said completed tests on a second employee at NBC confirmed that she had contracted anthrax of the skin while working in the area where Tom Brokaw's assistant was infected after opening or receiving a contaminated letter.

In New Jersey, where some of the anthrax-laced letters were postmarked, health officials recommended for the first time yesterday that all postal workers take 60-day regimens of Cipro, up from the 10-day course originally recommended. They cited test findings that one-third of samples taken from work areas at the Hamilton processing center had turned up positive for the presence of anthrax.

New Jersey officials also announced yesterday that a fourth postal worker was suffering from anthrax-like symptoms and that they were considering it a potential case. The first case of pulmonary anthrax, a much more serious form of infection, in the metropolitan region was confirmed earlier this week in a postal worker from near Trenton.

The Trenton postal locations and the illnesses of the postal workers have been under intensive scrutiny because anthrax-contaminated letters, including a highly potent one that was mailed to Senator Tom Daschle, the majority leader in Washington, had been shipped from there.

The announcement that some of Morgan's machines were contaminated sent shock waves through the center's workforce, with many workers demanding that all workers at the center be tested.

"Everyone in that whole station is afraid," said Derrick Reddick, a mail-sorting clerk for 17 years. "I don't want to go back to work there tomorrow. I feel they should close it down."

Beverly Pabon, another Morgan worker, added, "We should be tested just like everyone else. We don't want to wait for someone to die to be a test case."

To defuse tensions and protect the workers, the Postal Service began distributing Cipro late Wednesday to workers from Morgan and from five post offices in midtown Manhattan. By yesterday evening, more than 2,500 employees had picked up the antibiotic. In what it describes as a precautionary measure, the Postal Service is making a 10-day supply of Cipro available to a total of 7,000 New York City employees.

Postal officials said that the four machines were located on Morgan's third floor, on the south side of the building, facing 28th Street. The Postal Service is conducting additional tests of the four machines, and said after those tests it would do a thorough cleaning of the machines. Last week, postal officials swabbed many other spots in the building to test for anthrax.

The four machines, known as delivery bar code sorting machines, have optical scanners that read ZIP-code carrying bar codes and then sort the mail automatically.

Eli A. Argon, chief executive officer of Advanced Mail Management, based in Potomac, Md., said the employees who operate those machines, adjusting its switches and removing sorted mail, faced a risk of exposure to anthrax. He said the danger depended in part on whether the anthrax spores carried in envelopes were so fine that they could easily circulate in the air.

Mr. Argon said he doubted that New York City residents who receive mail that passed through Morgan's contaminated machines have much to worry about. He said most letters pass through the machine very quickly and are unlikely to pick up anthrax spores. He added that if letters did pick up some spores, they would probably be in small clumps likely to cause less serious skin anthrax instead of the more serious pulmonary anthrax.

New Jersey Health Commissioner George T. DiFerdinando said the state had decided that 60 days of treatment for postal workerswould be wiser after 19 of 59 *swab tests* taken at work areas in the regional processing center in Hamilton Township came back positive.

All 20 tests taken at the West Trenton Post office came back negative, however, but a letter carrier there was nonetheless infected with skin anthrax.

The state is also recommending a 10-day course of antibiotics for all employees at the Carteret Postal facility, where three anthrax-tainted letters were stored en route to their destinations in New York and Washington. No Carteret employees have contracted the illness.

The second NBC employee, whose case was confirmed by health officials yesterday, had developed symptoms on Sept. 28 that included headache, fever and skin bumps. She began taking antibiotics on Oct. 1 and is back at work.

A blood sample and biopsy taken from her two weeks ago both proved negative. But additional research has concluded that she has a probable case of anthrax, health officials said.



A truck driver pulled away from the Morgan center yesterday dressed for the times. A section of the center was cordoned off.

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