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Her second job could hold key to the puzzle

By DEVLIN BARRETT
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Medical sleuths trying to determine how hospital stockroom clerk Kathy Nguyen contracted a deadly case of inhalation anthrax said yesterday she may have worked a second job — at a restaurant.

"That's one of the leads that we're actively investigation," said Dr. Bradley Perkins of the Centers for Disease Control.

City health officials were unaware of the moonlighting gig, and Nguyen's neighbors knew only of her job at the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital.

Because Nguyen's case has no obvious link to germ-laden letters sent to media outlets in New York, and no bacteria was found at her workplace or Bronx home, probers are baffled about how she came in contact with the spores.

Perkins said the CDC is eyeing "a number of places where she either visited and ate in restaurants, or may actually have been employed."

So far, he admitted, "there are no good clues." But investigators have speculated Nguyen fell victim to cross-contamination, inhaling spores somehow transferred from tainted letters.

Meanwhile, there were new examples of cross-contamination in the nation's capital — with anthrax found at both the Pentagon and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"This contamination is going to be turning up all over town" as random tests for the bacteria are conducted, one law-enforcement official said.

His warning came as the Mayo Clinic announced it has developed a speedy DNA test for anthrax that takes less than an hour, instead of days, to show if an individual was exposed.

In New York, postal-union officials are due in court today to try to convince a judge to shut down the Morgan mail center in Midtown, where five sorting machines have tested positive for anthrax.

Government lawyers have filed papers arguing that "no one's life hangs in the balance" at the facility, and promising to shut it down if experts "determine that its continued operation creates a public-health risk."

Anthrax-related lawsuits were filed yesterday by the U.S. Court Security Officers and the State Supreme Court Officers Association, demanding testing of all buildings where their members work and prescreen mail.

In New Jersey, workers are set to return today to the West Trenton, N.J., post office, the mail-processing center that handled the anthrax-laced letters sent to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, NBC anchor Tom Brokaw and The Post.

The reopening comes one day after Norma Wallace, one of the facility's employees, was released from a hospital where she had been treated for inhalation anthrax. *With Post Wire Services*

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