

TB outbreak shocks New York resort town

by Ernest Schapiro, M.D.

Ellenville, New York is a small town in the Catskill Mountains, whose citizens' chief employers are local resorts and the Eastern New York Correctional Facility. In March, it was discovered that two children in Ellenville High School had contracted active tuberculosis. One of them had been coughing heavily for a long time, yet his illness went unrecognized until his brother, in the course of a physical examination, was found to have TB on his chest X-ray without any chest symptoms.

What is most shocking is that because regular tuberculosis testing is no longer required in New York schools, either on entrance or on an annual basis, no one can say how long these two boys have been infected.

In the meantime, they succeeded in transmitting the infection to many other students. In a high school of 1,000 students, 45 children were found on screening to be tuberculin positive. Three others additionally had chest X-ray findings of early tuberculosis.

Several school employees were found to be tuberculin positive, without active disease. Because there had been no previous tuberculin testing of students at the school, doctors could not determine whether those testing positive were recent converters or had been infected far in the past. A local tuberculosis specialist estimates that 80% of those testing positive were in fact recent converters!

Because of this uncertainty, all of the children are receiving medication to prevent active tuberculosis from developing.

Thus far, no tuberculosis has been detected in the elementary school. This suggests a single source for the epidemic. However, it is disturbing that the actual source of the epidemic is not known. Since the families of the two brothers included no active cases, we do not know how the boys got their disease.

This past winter, a hotel employee was found on chest X-ray to have tuberculosis. Because he was an illegal alien, he left the area taking his family with him, rather than be identified. His high-school-age child may have initiated the infection in the high school.

According to long-time residents of Ellenville, there are many hotel resort employees who work only a few months at a time before they are "dumped" without means of support. They spend their remaining funds, become indigent, and the local clergy buy them a ticket back to New York. Although some of the resorts keep their employees all year round,

others hire on a seasonal basis.

Local physicians privately complained that the local health department has no authority to test prospective employees for tuberculosis, AIDS, or other infectious diseases as a condition of employment.

One physician recounted the case of a cook at a resort hotel who was admitted to the local hospital suffering from far advanced tuberculosis of his lungs and died. Although this occurred several summers ago, a food handler at a resort still only requires a letter from a physician stating he is free of communicable disease. No specific test, such as a tuberculin test or a chest X-ray, is required. Local health officials feel threatened by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which they fear would accuse them of civil-rights violation were they to even suggest the advisability of an AIDS test.

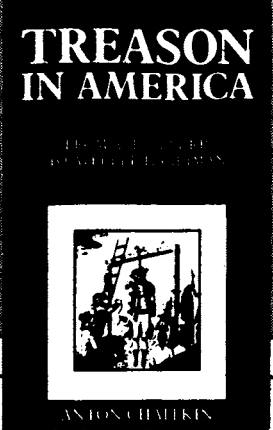
The relevance to the current case is that tuberculosis is being found to be associated with AIDS; persons carrying the HTLV-3 virus, whether or not they are overtly ill with AIDS, often have active tuberculosis.

Nevertheless, neither AIDS nor infection with the HTLV-3 virus is a reportable condition in New York State. It would therefore be illegal for a private physician or any government health agency, knowing an individual had AIDS or a positive HTLV-3 antibody test, to make this known to his employer, even though his work involves food-handling.

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