

Drug-resistant TB extends across U.S.

by Marcia Merry

The latest statistics show that tuberculosis is extending across all parts of the United States, and rapidly building to crisis levels at locations in a dozen states. There are now over 25,000 reported TB cases nationwide.

The national rate of increase in reported TB cases is given as 2% in 1991, after a galloping 9% increase in 1990. But this apparent decline does not at all indicate that the disease is receding. The pattern of incidence of cases rather shows concentrations of transmission and occurrence that point to a national health crisis.

New York is the home for one out of every six U.S. TB patients. A conference was held on the problem on April 2 in Atlanta, Georgia at the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC). One official there described the New York crisis as "at the meltdown stage."

On March 30, New York State Commissioner of Correctional Services Thomas A. Coughlin, III, released a survey which reported that 23% of inmates in the state prisons and 6% of prison employees test positive for TB. Of 55,000 inmates, 12,530 tested positive, and of 28,000 employees, 1,736 had positive results. The CDC says that approximately 10% of those exposed come down with the disease under normal conditions.

The survey is the most thorough ever undertaken, according to Coughlin, who ordered the study last November in response to reports that a guard and more than 20 inmates died from a drug-resistant form of the disease. Coughlin observes that no other state has done such a study, so it is impossible to tell if the New York results are typical for the national prison system, but they are much higher than the 4% national average of persons who test positive for exposure to the bacteria.

The top U.S. states for cases of TB reported from Jan. 1 through April 6 are: California (997 cases), New York (644), Texas (380), Illinois (316), Florida (243), New Jersey (219), Georgia (181), Pennsylvania (122), Tennessee (119), Michigan (105), and South Carolina (104). These statistics represent only those cases reported to the CDC. There are thousands more cases in the other states, thousands more in the top states whose occurrence was reported prior to January 1991, and still more cases unreported.

TB declined in the United States about 5% a year from 1953 to 1984, when the decline leveled out. In 1988, TB began to increase, and the number of cases increased by more

than 5% in 1990. "All it takes for an outbreak is one person who gets in an institution," Dr. Sam Dooley of the CDC warned in a recent interview with Virginia's *Roanoke Times and World News*.

Drug-resistant TB

The CDC estimates that 15-20% of tuberculosis cases today are the multi-drug resistant strain, for which, as yet, there is no adequate antibiotic treatment regimen. In Dooley's estimation, "people with a normal immune system have an 8-10% chance of developing active TB if they become infected. However, if they are HIV-infected, there's almost a 40% chance."

Dooley noted that there has been drug-resistant TB since drugs were developed. However, the new drug-resistant strains are not resistant to just one drug, but several. Dooley said drug-resistant TB most frequently occurs when drug treatments are not followed carefully—either because they are improperly prescribed or because patients (the homeless, drug addicts) do not take the drugs as prescribed. When this happens, patients can develop a resistance to several drugs and then infect others with drug-resistant TB.

In regular TB, the cure rate is as high as 95% if the TB is diagnosed. In the multi-drug-resistant form, the cure rate is in the range of 50-60%, and it takes much longer to cure—"at least 18-24 months, if you can treat it at all," said Dr. Dooley.

Reopen sanatoria?

Emergency meetings are taking place in many locations about contingency plans to deal with the spreading TB outbreak, and with AIDS and other diseases. The economic collapse which has fueled the renewed outbreak of TB and other illnesses is hitting hospitals hard. Bellevue Hospital in New York, for example, is so short of funds that there are insufficient masks, confinement quarters, and other equipment.

Health officials in many locations are scanning the regions for the possibility of reopening sanatoria, which have been closed since the last TB threat was beaten. The interview with Dr. Dooley appeared with an article on Roanoke's former TB sanatorium, reporting on discussion of reopening the facility to deal with TB today.

On April 2, CDC director William Roper told the House Human Resources subcommittee that the White House refused to spend the money to wipe out TB in the mid-1980s, when the chance was there, and now hundreds of millions of dollars are needed to deal with the urgent problem. Roper said CDC requested \$25 million in 1989 but the White House only approved \$7 million; in 1990, the request was \$29 million and \$7 million was approved; in 1991, \$35 million was requested and \$8 million approved; and this year \$35 million was requested and \$12 million approved.

"The tragedy of this epidemic is that we had it under control," said subcommittee chairman Rep. Ted Weiss (D-N.Y.). "But then we dropped the ball. We let the programs that defeated TB run out."