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SAN JOAQUIN COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICES RESPONDING TO AN OUTBREAK OF TUBERCULOSIS

Measures are being taken to control and prevent further spread of this infectious disease

STOCKTON, CA (February 20, 2015) – San Joaquin County Public Health Services continues to respond to a tuberculosis (TB) disease outbreak centered in Lodi. Over the past three years, a total of 21 individuals with active TB disease have been linked to this outbreak; 16 of these 21 people were diagnosed with TB in 2014. Some of the individuals with TB disease are children under two years of age, and one child has suffered serious complications as a result. Dr. Julie Vaishampayan, San Joaquin County TB Controller, stated that “the majority of the people live or have lived in Lodi in the past year, and all of the patients have drug-susceptible TB that can be treated with standard TB medications.” Some, but not all, of the persons with TB disease have used methamphetamines or spent time around others who are using methamphetamines, have been homeless, have been incarcerated, or have worked in health care facilities. The risk to the general public of getting TB from this outbreak is very low.

TB is caused by the bacteria *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, and is transmitted through the air. Droplets containing the bacteria can become airborne when a person with TB disease coughs, talks, or sings. These droplets are inhaled by other people and infection usually requires significant, not casual, contact. Some of the people who inhale these droplets will become infected, and some of those infected will develop active TB disease if they don't receive treatment to prevent it. Typically, transmission of TB bacteria is limited to family members, close friends, and people with sustained close contact. Although terms can be confusing, people with TB disease can be infectious and quite sick, while people with TB infection are not infectious and not at all sick. Their immune system is responding well and that immune response is picked up in the TB test. Those with TB infection can protect themselves and the people around them by completing treatment for TB infection because it effectively prevents them from developing TB disease.

TB prevention and control among homeless persons and drug-using populations requires public health departments to address special challenges:

- TB disease can be cured but treatment requires 6-12 months of antibiotics. Patient adherence is necessary to ensure that they become noninfectious and to prevent the development of drug resistant TB. Public Health Services' outreach workers observe patients take their TB medications on a daily basis. While resource- and labor-intensive, this strategy is the standard of TB care and a core strategy for containing TB outbreaks.

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- Securing living arrangements can support completion of TB therapy among the homeless or those who are housing insecure. Public Health Services is providing assistance for temporary housing, food, and transportation to those patients in the outbreak who are in need of those services.
- It can be difficult to locate persons who were exposed to TB and are homeless or use drugs, in order to provide testing and any necessary follow-up treatment. Public Health Services staff have found over 500 contacts to date and continue to look for contacts in a wide variety of settings including parks, places where drugs are used, hospitals, clinics, and correctional facilities. Staff are providing TB tests and treatment in the field and arranging transportation to medical facilities, when needed. Public Health Services is also providing a CDC-approved TB treatment regimen for preventing TB infection from developing into active TB disease. This treatment for TB infection requires only one medication dose per week for 12 weeks rather than daily doses for nine months.
- TB transmission occurs more easily in crowded, poorly ventilated settings. San Joaquin County Public Health Services ensures that persons with infectious TB disease are hospitalized in respiratory isolation or housed in a safe setting until they are no longer infectious.

Besides the above activities, Public Health Services staff sent an advisory about the outbreak investigation and response to health care providers in November 2014 and gave a presentation to health-care providers at Lodi Hospital in February of this year. In a wonderful partnership, Lodi Hospital has donated 50 chest x-rays and their readings for evaluation of contacts who are un-insured. Public Health Services staff have opened the Lodi clinic two days per week more than normal and provided a nurse practitioner to test and evaluate for TB infection and to initiate and monitor treatment. In another great partnership, the California Department of Public Health, TB Control Branch staff have been of immense help through allocating special needs funding and deploying staff to help with the outbreak investigation.

This TB outbreak illustrates the vulnerability of certain populations, such as young children and the homeless, and highlights the need for adequate resources for prompt, proactive, and sustained TB control efforts. Such efforts must be continued on a regular and ongoing basis in order to prevent future outbreaks.

The most common symptoms of active TB disease are a cough lasting for three weeks or more, night sweats, and weight loss. People should see their doctor if they have these symptoms or think they may have had close contact to someone with active TB disease. If someone you know has TB symptoms, please help them get medical care and complete all the medical evaluation and recommended treatment. "Rapid diagnosis and effective treatment are the essential public health tools needed not only to save the lives of individuals with TB, but also to stop transmission of TB and prevent infection and disease," said Dr. Vaishampayan.

For information on tuberculosis and screening in San Joaquin County, contact the Public Health Services Tuberculosis and Communicable Disease Control Program at 209-468-3822, weekdays 8am -5pm. Online information on TB is available at the following websites:

- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), <http://www.cdc.gov/tb/>
- California Department of Public Health (CDPH), <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/tb>

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Attachments: CDC Tuberculosis General Information Sheets in English and Spanish