



Biodefense solutions to protect our nation

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 4, 2009

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Fort Detrick officials today announced that a female military scientist at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) appears to be ill with tularemia, a bacterial infection that she may have acquired while working in the laboratory. The disease is not transmissible from person to person. Additional tests are still being conducted.

Tularemia, also known as “rabbit fever,” is caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. Tularemia is commonly found in animals, especially rodents, rabbits, and hares. About 200 human cases are reported each year in the United States, with most of those occurring in rural areas of the south central and western states.

Investigations are underway to determine how the employee, who worked with *Francisella tularensis*, may have become ill. She is currently recuperating at home and is responding well to treatment with antibiotics.

“We want to reassure the Frederick and Fort Detrick communities that this disease is not spread from person to person,” said Colonel John P. Skvorak, commander of USAMRIID. “Our immediate concern is to make sure our employee is receiving the appropriate medical care. Secondly, we are working to determine how she may have been infected and to ensure that no one else has been affected. Laboratory acquired infections are rare, but if they do occur, we need to review our procedures to minimize future incidents.”

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly all tularemia cases are caused by the bites of ticks and biting flies or from handling infected rodents, rabbits, or hares. Cases also have resulted from inhaling airborne bacteria and through laboratory exposures. The disease has been reported in all U.S. states except Hawaii.

Francisella tularensis is classified as a Biosafety Level 3 agent, meaning that the organism is studied only in a secured containment laboratory with controlled access. The laboratory suite is maintained at negative pressure to the outside, and the airflow from the

suite is filtered before it leaves the building. Inside the suite, work is performed in a biological safety cabinet with airflow designed to prevent the organism from escaping.

Colonel Skvorak said the employee was conducting basic research to identify new targets for developing medical countermeasures to protect against tularemia. Currently, there is no licensed vaccine for the disease, although a number of antibiotics have been shown to be effective when administered after exposure.

USAMRIID, located at Fort Detrick, Maryland, is the lead medical research laboratory for the U.S. Department of Defense Biological Defense Research Program, and plays a key role in national defense and in infectious disease research. The Institute conducts basic and applied research on biological threats resulting in medical solutions (such as vaccines, drugs and diagnostics) to protect the warfighter. While USAMRIID's primary mission is focused on the military, its research often has applications that benefit society as a whole. USAMRIID is a subordinate laboratory of the U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command.

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For more information on tularemia:

emergency.cdc.gov/agent/tularemia/faq.asp

www.usamriid.army.mil/education/instruct.htm

www.bordeninstitute.army.mil/published_volumes/biological_warfare/BW-ch08.pdf

For more information on USAMRIID:

www.usamriid.army.mil