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WORLD TB DAY OBSERVED MARCH 24

Health Department Remains Vigilant in Tracking and Treating Increasing Tuberculosis Cases

Tomorrow the global community will observe World TB Day to recognize the fact that tuberculosis is still an epidemic out of control in much of the world. While Westchester, and the United States as a whole, are fortunate that cases of TB remain low in comparison to other countries, Health Department staff remain vigilant for the possibility of a continuing upward trend.

“Following years of stability, Westchester County experienced a small spike in TB cases during 2006,” said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “Because the data are from a single year, it is difficult to know whether they represent an anomaly or the beginning of an upward trend in prevalence of the disease. We are certainly keeping a close eye on developments this year.”

From 1999 through 2005, there was an average of about 58 new TB cases diagnosed each year in Westchester, with most cases occurring among foreign-born residents. In 2005, there were 53 new cases. Last year, 2006, saw a jump in cases with 72 TB cases diagnosed.

Because TB is relatively uncommon in the United States, there is often a delay in diagnosis and treatment of the disease, during which time the infection can be spread to others. In addition, an increasing number of infections appear to be occurring in otherwise healthy individuals who are in a position to interact with the general public, such as healthcare workers and school students and personnel.

In 2006, eight students at a college and secondary schools in Westchester were diagnosed with TB. As a result, the Health Department tested approximately 500 students and staff at the schools for TB. Already this year, two similar cases have required 600 students and staff at Westchester schools to be tested.

The Westchester County Health Department is currently working with the New York State Department of Health and student health services in Westchester colleges and schools to identify students that may be at risk

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of TB infection and arrange for them to receive appropriate evaluation and treatment.

In observance of World Tuberculosis Day, the Health Department has created a special World TB Day section on its website, www.westchestergov.com/health , where information about tuberculosis and links to TB related resources can be found.

Tuberculosis is a disease that is spread from person to person through the air. It usually infects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body. General symptoms of TB may include feeling weak or sick, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. Persistent coughing, chest pain, or coughing up blood might be symptoms of TB of the lungs.

A skin test is the only way to tell if a person has been infected with TB before he actually comes down with the illness. If a skin test indicates that he or she has been infected with TB, treatment can prevent that person's TB from becoming active. In most cases, the individual will need to take medication for several months to prevent tuberculosis.

Active cases of TB require that patients be treated with up to four drugs for a period of six to nine months. An increasing number of cases are requiring longer treatment. A major challenge to combating the disease is ensuring that those who are infected complete their full course of treatment. To overcome this problem, the Health Department's TB Control Program uses directly observed therapy (in which a health care worker watches the patient take each dose of medicine) for all active TB cases to make certain that each patient completes his or her course of therapy.

The program also places high priority on early identification and treatment of cases, as well as aggressive contact tracing to find and assess people who may have been exposed. In addition, through its TB Clinics, the Health Department provides direct medical care and medications to individuals with tuberculosis infection and disease, free of charge to patients.

For more information about tuberculosis, or the tuberculin skin test, call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit www.westchestergov.com/health.