

CA lab revisits safety steps after researcher dies

May 4 2012, By PAUL ELIAS , Associated Press

(AP) -- Lab workers at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs medical center will be urged to get vaccinations for the diseases they study as a precaution as investigators continue looking into a researcher's death after he handled a rare strain of bacteria, officials said Thursday.

Richard Din, the meningitis research associate who died Saturday in a possible lab exposure, wasn't vaccinated for the illness despite Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations to the contrary. Nonetheless, the VA's Harry Lampiris said a vaccine may not have protected Din, 25, because he was helping to develop a vaccine for a meningitis strain resistant to vaccine.

Lampiris also said about 70 people who came into contact with Din recently - including family members, co-workers and medical personnel who treated him - received [antibiotic treatments](#) that are "100 percent effective" in combatting infection.

Din, who lived on San Francisco's Treasure Island, fell ill with a headache and other flu-like symptoms about two hours after leaving work Friday evening, Lampiris said.

He awoke Saturday feeling worse and with a rash all over his body, and he was rushed to the VA hospital by friends.

Lampiris said Din lost consciousness in the car and died in the hospital of a heart attack at about 2 p.m. The vaccine-resistant [strain of bacteria](#)

was found in his bloodstream.

Lampiris said it is unclear how Din was exposed to the bacteria because he had a reputation as a safe, by-the-book research associate at the VA hospital's Northern California Institute for Research and Education.

Lampiris said lab workers are expected to wear gloves and gowns, and they do their work behind a protective "safety cabinet," or hood, while isolating the bacteria.

"He was an excellent lab worker and very fastidious," said Lampiris, chief of infectious disease at the San Francisco VA research institute. Lampiris said there were no signs of spills or mechanical failure in the lab where Din worked, which was decontaminated and temporarily closed pending investigations.

Officials with the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration have opened a joint investigation into Din's death. The CDC is researching whether the bacterial strain found in Din's bloodstream is the same strain he worked with in the lab.

Cal-OSHA spokeswoman Erika Monterroza said her office has six months to conclude its investigation and can levy fines if workplace regulations were violated.

"We're very early in the process," she said.

So-called laboratory-acquired infections are "rare occurrences," according to CDC spokesman Tom Skinner. But they do happen.

According to a 2005 paper published in the Journal of Clinical Microbiology - the most recent study of its kind - 16 cases of probable laboratory-acquired meningitis occurred worldwide between 1985 and

2001, and eight of them were fatal.

Other infections also occur, including a Chicago researcher who died in 2009 after exposure to bacteria that causes the plague, and a University of Illinois student who came down with a mild case of cow pox the next year after a laboratory exposure. The CDC reported last year that 73 people in 35 states were infected with salmonella in lab-associated incidents between August 2010 and March 2011.

The CDC also reported to Congress that seven researchers were infected with a so-called "select agent" between 2003 and 2009. Select agents include dangerous pathogens such as small pox and anthrax but not meningitis.

"Laboratory-acquired infection represents an occupational hazard unique to laboratory workers, especially those in the microbiology laboratory," Kamaljit Singh of Chicago's Rush University Medical Center concluded in a 2009 scientific paper published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*. Singh estimated that 500,000 lab workers handle dangerous germs in the United States.

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Citation: CA lab revisits safety steps after researcher dies (2012, May 4) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-05-ca-lab-revisits-safety-dies.html>

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