Health Department

URGENT MESSAGE TO:

Directors of Public Health
Consultants in Public Health Medicine (CD&EH)
Emergency Planning Officers
Medical Directors of NHS Trusts
Specialists in Pharmaceutical Public Health
Clinical Director SCIEH
NHS 24

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7 January 2003

BIOTERRORISM ALERT – RICIN POISON IN THE ENVIRONMENT

Please find attached for urgent transmission (see list below) copy of joint statement from the Metropolitan Police and DCMO England about the detection of Ricin on items removed from a London flat. The statement is followed by some facts on Ricin, and a summary of clinical matters. More clinical detail is available on the SCIEH Website.

The purpose of this communication is to alert clinical and other NHS colleagues to the potential of unusual clinical illness linked to terrorist threats arising.

Anyone who is concerned about this potential should contact their local NHS Board Department of Public Health, the Scottish Poisons Information Bureau through TOXBASE, or SCIEH. Contact details follow the statement.

1. Please could Medical Directors in NHS Trusts forward on to:

- All General Practitioners, and out of hours services – please ensure this message is seen by all practice nurses and non-principals working in your practice and retain a copy in your “locum information pack”.
- Staff in A&E Departments, Intensive Care Units, High Dependency Units
- Directors of Nursing
- Consultant Pathologists
- Trust Chief Pharmacists

2. Please could Directors of Public Health forward the message to:

- Chief Executives, NHS Boards
3. Please could Specialists in Pharmaceutical Public Health forward on to:

- Community Pharmacists

Thank you for your co-operation.

Yours sincerely

DR ANDREW FRASER
Deputy Chief Medical Officer
7 January 2003

Dear health professional

**Concern over Ricin Poison in the Environment**

The following joint statement from the Metropolitan Police and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, England was issued today.

“In the early hours of Sunday 5 January, six men and one woman were arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000 at premises in North and East London by officers from the Metropolitan Police Anti-Terrorist Branch.

The six men aged in their late teens, twenties and thirties remain in custody and are being interviewed by Anti Terrorist Branch Officers. The woman has now been released.

This successful joint operation between the Anti-Terrorist Branch, MPS Special Branch and the Security Service followed receipt of intelligence.

A quantity of material and items of equipment were found at a residential premises in Wood Green, North London where one of the men was arrested.

This material has been analysed at the Defence Science and Technology Laboratories at Porton Down. A small amount of the material recovered from the Wood Green premises has tested positive for the presence of ricin poison. Ricin is a toxic material which if ingested, inhaled or injected can be fatal.

Our primary concern is the safety of the public and the police have worked closely with the Department of Health throughout. Tests were carried out on the material and it was confirmed this morning that toxic material was present.

The Department is now alerting the health service, including primary care, about these developments. It is also ensuring that the Health Service is able to provide advice to the public, including through NHS 24.

If any new developments have implications for public safety we will ensure that the public is informed immediately.

Intensive police investigations are continuing and forensic analysis of the premises in Wood Green will take some time to complete. We have previously said that London and indeed the rest of the UK continues to face a range of terrorist threats from a number of different groups and while our message is still alert not alarm, we would reiterate our earlier appeals for the public to remain vigilant and aware and report anything suspicious to police.

We are asking people to be vigilant about their surroundings, particularly in public places and if they see anything suspicious to dial 999 immediately. We are also encouraging the public to call the free confidential anti-terrorist hotline 0800 789321 if they have any information about people or activities that could be linked to terrorism.

The Metropolitan Police is doing everything possible to combat the threat of terrorism but it is only with the help and support of the public that we can reduce the harm which it causes.”
In this context, you will wish to be aware of the following details.

NOTES TO THE STATEMENT

Ricin

Ricin is a protein toxin that is derived from castor oil seeds. It inhibits protein synthesis and has widespread toxic effects on the body. These include damage to most organ systems and a combination of pulmonary, liver, renal and immunological failure may lead to death. No antidote is known: treatment can only be supportive.

Clinical features

The early symptoms depend on the route of exposure. Fever, gastrointestinal upset, coughing may be amongst the first effects noted.

Absorption via the lung as a result of exposure to aerosolised toxin leads to particularly serious lung damage including pulmonary oedema and Adult Respiratory Distress Syndrome.

Ingestion of ricin causes irritation of the gut: gastroenteritis, bloody diarrhoea and vomiting.

Effects on the Central Nervous System have been reported including seizures and CNS depression.

The effects of exposure to ricin may be delayed for some hours after exposure and patients who develop a fever may consult their own doctors.

Diagnosis

The early stages of ricin intoxication are difficult to distinguish from those of some infections; they may mimic septicemia. Diagnosis will depend on a high index of suspicion. Should you have concerns, further information is available on the SCIEH website and from the National Poisons Information Service (NPIS). Patients thought to have been exposed to ricin should be referred to hospital. Those who remain asymptomatic for 24 hours may be discharged from hospital.

This is a useful opportunity to reiterate the need to look for any signs of possible exposure to other hazards that could be released deliberately. If you find anything unusual, please alert your local NHS Board Department of Public Health, or Scottish Poisons Information Bureau (NPIS Edinburgh).

Contact details are as follows.

National Poisons Information Service: Telephone 0870 600 6266 (24 hour)
TOXBASE: www.spib.axl.co.uk

Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health Telephone 0141 300 1100 : out of hours 0141 211 3600
www.show.scot.nhs.uk/scieh/