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Hundreds May Face TB Exposure in Okla.- - - - - - - - - - - -By TIM TALLEY Associated Press WriterSeptember 18,2006 | OKLAHOMA CITY -- Hundreds of patients and hospital workers may have been exposed to tuberculosis by a health care worker sick with the airborne disease, and at least 10 people have caught it, public health officials said Monday.A letter sent to about 1,650 patients and 350 workers at Integris Southwest Medical Center in Oklahoma City warned of their potential exposure and urged them to get skin tests to determine whether they were infected, said Dr. Gene Claflin, medical director of the Oklahoma City-County Health Department. About 250 members of the general public have also been alerted.The disease was diagnosed in at least 10 people among the 600 people who have been tested so far, including all of the hospital employees, said Mary Spinner, administrator of the tuberculosis program for the agency. Spinner said she expects the number to rise as more people are tested."They have a right to know about their exposure. Then they have a right to an evaluation," she said. Notification and testing is being conducted by the City-County Health Department.Spinner said tests are needed only by people who shared the same air space with the infected worker, not friends, relatives and acquaintances of those who received letters.The employee, who was not identified, was found to have the disease Aug. 14 but reported experiencing symptoms six months earlier, officials said. TB primarily affects the lungs, and symptoms include coughing, shortness of breath, low-grade fever, chills and possible weight loss.The health care worker was a woman who worked on several floors of the hospital, but authorities, citing privacy rights, declined to reveal her job title or say how frequently she had contact with patients. She has not worked at the hospital since her condition was diagnosed."There have been multiple people exposed to this individual," said Dr. David Chansolme, medical director of hospital epidemiology and employee health. "We have identified a number of people who have had potential exposures."The disease is spread by germs that float in the air when an infected persons coughs, shouts or sneezes and are inhaled by others. Last year there were 144 confirmed cases of TB in the state, officials said. In 2003, 28 percent of all TB cases in the state occurred in Oklahoma County.Chansolme said that tuberculosis is a slowly developing disease and that it can take years for an exposed person to become ill. TB is "a very treatable disease," Chansolme said. But it can be fatal if left untreated and kills nearly 2 million people worldwide each year, according to the Mayo Clinic's Web site.A vaccine is available and has proven effective, but it is not widely used in the United States and is more often administered in countries where TB is common, the Mayo clinic's Web site says.--__On the Net:Oklahoma City-County Health Department: http://www.cchdoc.comMayo Clinic: http://www.mayoclinic.com