County Of San Diego

RESPONSES FOR COUNCILMEMBER ZAPF – Submitted July 26, 2017

1. Can Hepatitis A be spread from contamination on the river bed down to the Pacific Ocean?

- Hepatitis A virus can persist in the environment, including fresh and salt water, for days to months depending on ambient conditions, including light, pH, and temperature. Hepatitis A virus has the highest survival rate in low temperatures.
- Adequate chlorination keeps the drinking water supply from being contaminated with hepatitis A, however, outbreaks of disease have been reported linked to underchlorinated swimming pools.
- Any material that is contaminated with hepatitis A virus, including human feces, that enters the San Diego River could potentially be transmitted downriver, though significant dilution would occur in transit.
- The specific risk to individuals downstream from this run off is unknown, but would be expected to be very low.

2. Has staff from Health and Human Services found any evidence of Hepatitis A in any individuals who frequent the River Valley?

Yes. As of July 24, 2017, 275 hepatitis A cases have been identified in the San Diego County outbreak. The County Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA) Epidemiology Program staff members are aware of four cases (including one death) that have been linked to the San Diego River Valley. Of note, hepatitis A Field Teams made the first visit to the River Valley, with SD Police Department Homeless Outreach Teams, on Thursday, July 20, 2017.

3. Are the illegal encampments along the river prime to spread Hepatitis A amongst those dwelling in the immediate area?

- Hepatitis A virus is primarily being spread during this outbreak by close person-to-person contact that results in ingestion of even microscopic amounts of fecal matter.
- Hepatitis A can be prevented by vaccination and/or optimal hygiene, including washing hands after using the bathroom and before eating.
- Any conditions where proper sanitary conditions are not met may allow for the hepatitis A virus to spread more easily.

4. Should public safety officers be using universal precautions when entering into these encampments?

- The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) defines universal precautions as an approach to infection control to treat all human blood and certain human body fluids as if
they were known to be infectious for HIV, hepatitis (A, B, C), and other blood borne pathogens. The use of gloves in the field would be recommended to prevent cuts and contact with human waste or sewage.

- The ongoing local hepatitis A outbreak should serve as a reminder for public safety officers and all others who may be closely interacting with the populations at risk to follow proper protocol as it relates to hygiene.
- As mentioned in a letter to public safety and other staff (originally dated May 24, 2017; reversion dated July 25, 2017), and respective FAQs, any staff working closely with these populations should be offered hepatitis A vaccination. Use of gloves is recommended to prevent cuts and contact with human waste or sewage. This advice would be recommended for any individuals going into an area that is potentially contaminated with human feces.

5. The San Diego River Park Foundation has many volunteers who routinely clean in the River Park – should these volunteers be taking greater precautions?

Any volunteers working in a potentially fecal-contaminated environment should be vaccinated against hepatitis A, and should follow good hygiene and wash their hands before eating and after using the restroom. The use of gloves would be recommended to prevent cuts and contact with human waste or sewage.

6. How long does the virus remain alive in fecal matter in public restrooms along our beaches and bay?

- The length of the time the hepatitis A virus can survive outside of the body varies depending on environmental conditions.
- It can live outside the body for up to months if not cleaned adequately.
- EPA-approved disinfectants should be used to clean these areas on a regular basis.
- Businesses, where homeless and drug-using individuals frequent, have and continue to be encouraged to maintain optimal sanitation, especially during this outbreak.

7. Many church groups feed up to 300 homeless individuals weekly with as many as 6 feedings a week in some communities in my district. Are these types of large gatherings of unsheltered individuals of any concern to the transmission of Hepatitis A to the community at large?

- The Department of Environmental Health has been conducting ongoing outreach to organizations that conduct homeless feedings as well as food facilities to educate them on proper handwashing to prevent contamination of food, as well as sanitization of common areas, such as public restrooms.
- Risk of transmission typically occurs when a food or beverage is shared with an infected person. It is also possible for an individual to come into contact with a surface contaminated with fecal matter containing hepatitis A, and then ingest the contamination and become ill.
- Like many other illnesses, practicing good personal hygiene, like proper handwashing, reduces the risk of transmission.

- Information on proper handwashing hygiene and other preventative measures is available on the DEH webpage; additional resources and information on hepatitis A and the San Diego outbreak is available on the HHSA webpage. Weekly updates on the hepatitis A outbreak are posted on this webpage.

- Volunteers or anyone who works closely with populations at risk (e.g., homeless, illicit drug users) should be encouraged to get vaccinated. Any large gathering of individuals at these locations should have access to handwashing facilities and restrooms.

Our County team welcomes any of your suggestions and recommended partnerships to help protect the River Valley and provide the unsheltered individuals, seeking refuge in this area, the services that they need. Of note, field teams went to the River Valley with the SD Police Department Homeless Outreach Teams on Thursday, July 20, 2017.

I hope this information is useful. Should you have additional questions, please don’t hesitate to let us know. If a presentation would be useful, please contact Dr. Sayone Thihalolipavan at sayone.thihalolipavan@sdcounty.ca.gov or 619-542-4916.