



LABORATORY BULLETIN

October 06, 2004

To: Alberta Regional Laboratory Directors and Managers
From: ProvLab Alberta
Re: URGENT Public Health Message for ALL Microbiology Laboratories

PLEASE DISTRIBUTE THIS MESSAGE AND THE ATTACHED INFORMATION TO APPROPRIATE LABORATORY STAFF IN MICROBIOLOGY LABORATORIES WITHIN YOUR REGION.

Tularemia: Information for Laboratories in Alberta

The Public Health Agency of Canada has issued an advisory for British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario regarding the possibility of humans contracting tularemia from exposure to infected hamsters or other small mammals (chincilla's, guinea pigs, gerbils, degues) purchased in the last three months. See attached notices.

Ill hamsters from a pet distributor in Manitoba have been found to be infected with Type B tularemia (*Francisella tularensis* subsp. *holarctica* as opposed to Type A – *Francisella tularensis* subsp. *tularensis*). The infection of other pet species cohoused or exposed to infected hamsters is currently being investigated.

Human infection due to contact with an infected rodent is possible. The most likely clinical presentation would be either ulceroglandular (acquired through an animal bite or minor injury from a contaminated object) or typhoidal/ systemic disease.

Symptoms of tularemia may include ulcers on the skin or mouth, swollen glands and painful lymph glands, sudden fever, chills, headache, diarrhea, muscle aches, dry cough, progressive weakness, joint pain, sore throat and swollen painful eyes. Symptoms usually appear three to five days after exposure to the bacteria but can take as long as 14 days to appear.

F. tularensis is classified as a Risk Group 3 bacterial agent based on its high infectivity and association with laboratory-acquired infection (Material Safety Data Sheet, Health Canada attached). For this reason the Provincial Laboratory requests that all microbiological investigations of suspected *F. tularensis* cases be performed in the Provincial Laboratory Level 3 facility.

Because specimens are routinely submitted to microbiology laboratories without clinical information, it is more likely that the isolation of this organism in culture will be the first point of recognition. Since *F. tularensis* is an unusual bacterial isolate, we have provided the attached bacterial identification information for your convenience. If you have a



suspicious isolate, please contact the Microbiologist-On-Call at either the Edmonton or Calgary sites to facilitate the referral of the isolate to the Level 3 facility in Edmonton for further identification.

Should your laboratory be requested to examine dead animals for tularemia related to this event, please contact your regional Medical Officer of Health. Dead animals will be checked for tularemia by the National Microbiology Laboratory only if deemed appropriate as part of the ongoing investigation of possibly infected shipments by your region's MOH.

Microbiologist-On-Call
Edmonton Site: (780) 407-7121
Calgary Site: (403) 268-7210