

NB government puts lid on E. coli and comes under fire for inaction [CA-NB] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

FREDERICTON (CP) - The New Brunswick Health Department put a lid on the E. coli outbreak Friday, saying only that test results were pending on dozens of possible cases. And officials said there wouldn't be any update on the problem until Monday. The Conservative government's handling of the outbreak, which claimed the life of a 23-month-old toddler in Saint John, N.B., has been criticized by opposition politicians and at least one child-care expert.

Health Minister Elvy Robichaud said nothing about the situation in the legislature Friday, despite the fact a 22-month-old child from Moncton, N.B., was being treated in Halifax for complications from an E. coli infection and six cases have been confirmed in Saint John.

"The minister of health has an obligation to provide a full and complete report to this legislature and the people of New Brunswick instead of remaining mute in the face of anxiety and concern," said NDP Leader Elizabeth Weir.

"He just sits there."

After complaints New Brunswickers hadn't been adequately informed about the outbreak, the Health Department published a detailed synopsis of the deadly bacteria, its causes and symptoms, on its Web site.

Health officials appear to be playing down the seriousness of the outbreak, pointing out the province averages 40 cases of E. coli every year.

The outbreak is the second serious occurrence in New Brunswick this year. An earlier one in the province's north affected 23 people. There were no deaths.

Health officials also have said it's not surprising E. coli would gain a foothold in a day care where diapers, toilet training and the sharing of toys make it difficult to control germs and bacteria.

The outbreak in Saint John has a common link to day cares run by the YW-YMCA.

Officials do not believe the E. coli originated in the Y's infant day care. They think the bacteria was carried to the centre by someone, possibly one of the infected children, and from there it was transmitted to other children and their families.

Three members of one Saint John family have tested positive for E. coli: a mother, her nine-year-old daughter and a two-year-old who had been in the infant day care.

As well, 23-month-old Jeffrey Bates, who died last Saturday from E. coli complications, had attended the infant day care. Bates was New Brunswick's first known fatality from E. coli.

The 22-month-old girl being treated in a Halifax hospital had been attending a private babysitting centre that has been closed pending tests on others in the home.

The little girl was in stable and fair condition Friday after receiving dialysis for kidney problems.

Child-care experts believe the New Brunswick government shouldn't dismiss as inevitable the spread of potentially fatal diseases in day-care centres.

"Instead of throwing up their hands and saying day-care centres are a cesspool of germs . . . they should be proactive and put the things in place that are known to address these problems," said Martha Friendly, co-ordinator of child-care research at the University of Toronto.

Friendly said governments across Canada need to be more stringent about enforcing health and hygiene measures in day cares.

She said even something as simple as making children and staff wash their hands more often can cut the rate of infectious diseases in half.

"My impression is this is a very undealt-with area," said Friendly, who believes government spending cuts have made the situation worse.

"Government regulators seem much more concerned about things like how many inches there are between cribs."

Gavin Clark, a professor of microbiology at the University of Toronto, said day cares are notorious for the spread of germs. He said it's not surprising to see an E. coli outbreak in a day-care setting.

"With due respect to all little kiddies, they are not such clean little animals," he said. "It's wide open for that."

Clark said very young children are more susceptible to E. coli infections. He said they need only a tiny exposure to become infected.

"It's calculated to be as low as 50 or less organisms which, bacteriologically, is nothing."

Administrators at the YW-YMCA day cares in Saint John have implemented more stringent hygiene measures, including asking people not to wear outdoor shoes in the infant section and demanding that children with fevers stay home.

reprinted from CP Wire.

Region: New Brunswick ^[2]

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