

E. coli cases are not connected

Published: June 7, 2004

The Union Democrat

By ERIN MAYES

Lab results returned last week show there is no connection between two different groups of Calaveras County children diagnosed with E. coli last month.

"It is different strains of the bacteria between the first group of young children and the second group of teenagers," said Colleen Tracy, county Public Health Department director. "We have not found any link between those two groups."

The Health Department has not found the sources of infection that sickened six people, ranging in age from 8 months to 17 years old. However, Tracy said, the common link between three boys of 13, 14 and 17 who got E. coli is that they each exhibited beef livestock at the May 13-16 Calaveras County Fair.

Also, the 14-year-old and 17-year-old are brothers who live near Murphys and were shown to have the same strain of bacteria. The 13-year-old's DNA tests have not been completed yet.

There are still no clues as to how 4-year-old Angels Camp resident Nicholas Kristoff, his 8-month-old sister Abigail and a 3-year-old family friend were infected with the bacteria in early May. Kristoff is the only victim who suffered a violent reaction -- he was hospitalized with hemolytic uremic syndrome, a related kidney complication, but has made a full recovery and has been discharged from Oakland Children's Hospital.

Nicholas and Abigail contracted the same strain of E. coli and results are not available yet on the 3-year-old.

"It's not uncommon to not be able to find the original source," Tracy said, adding that the most important task for her department has been "ruling out any contaminated commercial food product or a water problem that would cause a widespread threat."

No public threat was found and unless another E. coli case surfaces, the Public Health Department has no plans to continue investigating the cause of the infections, Tracy said.

As the cases cropped up, the health department issued notices twice to physicians to immediately test any patients showing "diarrheal illness," Tracy said.

Additionally, at Avery Middle and Bret Harte High schools, where the 14-year-old and 17-year-old went to school, informational fliers were sent home to parents. And after the third teen was diagnosed with E. coli, notices were sent to parents of children who exhibited beef cattle at the fair.

Tracy said she doesn't know if the Health Department will recommend to county fairgrounds managers that they take additional steps to prevent E. coli infections in the future.

This is the second time since the 2002 fair that children who were known to have been in the livestock areas were infected with the bacteria, although it has not been determined that they got it at the fairgrounds.

E. coli lives in the intestines of cattle, hogs and some other farm animals and can be passed on when the bacteria exits in the form of manure. The illness is most often contracted through the consumption of undercooked hamburger meat.

The fairgrounds' barns are outfitted with four hand-washing stations and nine hand-sanitization stations to prevent the spread of such diseases.

"I think what we want to do after this is we want to have a joint meeting (with fairgrounds officials)," Tracy said. "We are, of course, familiar with their hand-washing stations. We are just starting to ask ourselves the question (of whether further preventive measures should be taken)."

Fair officials said they don't anticipate making any changes. But a discussion of the E. coli outbreak is on the agenda for a fair board operations committee meeting. The meeting is scheduled for 4:30 p.m. Wednesday in the administration building at Frogtown.

With the state laboratory in Richmond backed up, Tracy said she's not sure how much longer it may take to get results back on the 3-year-old and the 13-year-old.

Contact Erin Mayes at emayes@uniondemocrat.com