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TB outbreak worries county health officer

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A child's routine exam at a county health clinic in September has led to the discovery that 21 residents of a local farm labor camp have been exposed to tuberculosis.

The county Health Department is "now following 25 active cases of the disease" in the county, according to a letter to be sent from the county's health official to the Board of Supervisors.

Health department workers anxious to find the source and stop additional exposures were out at the San Andreas Labor Camp yesterday and Wednesday with a mobile X-ray unit. Tuberculin skin tests were administered, and interviews with residents were being conducted to try to find the carrier.

"There is somebody who is infectious," Dr. Ira Lubell, county health official, said this morning.

"It could be a baby sitter, it could be a grandma, someone who had had an old case. It may be someone who doesn't even live there, someone who comes to visit, maybe a boyfriend."

Lubell said there is concern that the number of TB cases in the county last year - 25 - was double that of 1992, and more than triple the six cases in 1991.

Health officials are additionally worried over the increase in cases among young children. Of the 21 people exposed at San Andreas, 15, or about 20 percent, are children 15 or younger. The state average for that age group is 11 percent.

"We had TB really under control around here for years," Lubell said. "Now, we're approaching the state average" of 17.5 cases per 100,000 people. The county's rate now stands at 10.5; across the United States, it is 10.4 per 100,000

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people.

Noting prime TB grounds - areas of crowded and substandard housing, poor nutrition, and lax or absent health laws - Lubell said TB carriers are apparently arriving in the county from "somewhere else."

County statistics indicate that of the 25 cases cited in 1993, 15 are Latinos, 10 originated in the United States, and 11 originated in Mexico. Four of the 25 were homeless.

Citing different factors contributing to the increase in the disease, Lubell's letter says, "One significant factor is an increase in immigration from areas in which tuberculosis is very common. Other factors include the increase in homelessness and the HIV epidemic."

Lubell stressed that the average person in good health will, if exposed to the disease, develop antibodies and never actually contract TB. He said TB is actually less communicable than the common cold, and added that "very close contact" is required to pass on TB bacteria.

Lubell said that despite budget and personnel cuts in his department, the Tuberculosis Control Unit has made controlling the current outbreak a priority. "I think it's one of the most important issues around here," he said.

Among the steps being taken are targeting high-risk groups for screening and prevention, offering screening and prevention to the general public, investigating all reports of suspected TB cases, providing follow up on all recently infected individuals, and providing education about symptoms, screening, prevention and treatment.

TB tests are available to the public at county clinics.