Strep Outbreak in Anchorage Homeless Population

Mary Al-Khazraji

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The homeless population here in Anchorage, Alaska has recently been inundated with another

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The homeless population here in Anchorage, Alaska has recently been inundated with another

major concern: an outbreak in their population of streptococcus bacteria.

Homelessness in Alaska

On top of the normal hardships of homeless living, homelessness in Anchorage is

particularly difficult, and because of the high cost of living it is a growing population. If a person

loses their job and/or home, they cannot simply buy a bus ticket to another town or state and

begin anew. Driving requires going through Canada which provides its own difficulties. Flying is

cost prohibitive. Therefore once a person becomes homeless in Alaska they are simply stuck

here. The winters are incredibly difficult to survive, lasting from mid-September to mid-April.

Being homeless in a place with four to five feet of snow covering everything and only a few

hours of sunlight a day can be nearly impossible. This, of course, has a severe effect on the

immune system and the ability to fight off diseases. A lack of access to basic hygiene and

nutrition puts the homeless person at greater risk for contracting such illnesses as strep (Hillman,

2017).

Strep outbreak in homeless population

* Starting in the fall of 2016 and continuing on through 2017 a rare strain of strep had an

outbreak in the Anchorage and Fairbanks homeless population. It was a Group A Streptococcus

(GAS) bacteria that sent dozens to the hospital and killed at least four more (Andrews, 2016).

The specific subtype was fairly rare, an invasive Group A Streptococcus (iGAS) subtype labeled

emm26.3 (Mosites, Frick, & Grounder, 2017). There are a variety of reasons why, once

introduced into the population, the strep bacteria was easily able to spread amongst the homeless.

As previously mentioned, the homeless population often have difficulty maintaining a healthy

level of hygiene, often lack proper nutrition, and can potentially have chronic problems that lead

to the homelessness in the first place. Because of this they are predisposed to being affected by

an illness.

On top of this, they often congregate together. They interact closely with one another in

the shelters that provide lodging at night and at the outreaches that feed them hot meals during

the day. They tend to stick together in various areas around the city. This is probably done for

several reasons. Being alone and homeless is most likely a very lonely life. The average

“normal” (for lack of a better term) person does not often interact with the homeless so they

gather together out of a sense of camaraderie. No one would understand your situation as well as

another person living it. There is also safety in numbers. Anchorage can be a dangerous city for

anyone. The risk of danger grows steadily when you are one the street with no security for

yourself or your belongings. Close relationships and interactions with others are important to

facilitate a “you watch my back and I watch yours” situation. These close interactions are a very

relevant factor in the spread of the strep infection.

Response efforts

* This was the first recorded incident of this type of strep breakout in the state of Alaska.

The outbreak reached a point of severity that a team from the federal Center for Disease Control

flew in to assist (Kelly, 2017). Despite the severity of the infection’s breakout and the difficulty

of treatment due to the mobility of the affected group, the healthcare providers tasked with

addressing this outbreak were able to adequately respond. Single-dose antibiotics and antiseptic

washes were handed out and provided to shelters and other areas where the affected homeless

were (Hillman, 2017). One of the greatest efforts has been promoting knowledge of the disease

and the steps for preventing its spread. The effort to address the outbreak has appropriately

informed the general public about the severity of the outbreak. Nearly every article, news piece,

and public announcement has included a reassurance that the average healthy person does not

have to fear contracting the infection. This is an important step in preventing a mass panic in the

local population.

Conclusion

The homeless population of Alaska has suffered a serious blow with this infection. The

nature of their situation predisposes them toward contracting a serious illness and the strain of

strep bacteria took full advantage of this over the course of several months. It is unfortunate that

so many were affected by this outbreak, and even moreso it was unfortunate that some lost their

lives. It is quite fortunate, however, that there are several teams of health care providers and even

a federal CDC team who have taken great strides to combat the outbreak. They have given the

needed care for those that are affected and provided the medications and sanitary supplies to

centers where the at-risk homeless population congregate. It is a difficult situation that has been

dealt with in an impressive and professional manner.

* References

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Strep Outbreak in Anchorage Homeless Population

Life is often difficult. The average person has multiples stresses and concerns they must deal with on a daily basis. When you are homeless, though, these stresses are exponentially worse. The average adult with a family tend to worry about such things as if they have enough time to take the children to soccer and ballet while still figuring out what to cook for dinner in the evening. The homeless person is concerned with whether they will eat today, if they will be able to stay warm enough in the harsh winter weather, if they will have an opportunity to clean themselves, and if they will be safe overnight. These are grave enough concerns on their own. The homeless population here in Anchorage, Alaska has recently been inundated with another major concern: an outbreak in their population of streptococcus bacteria.

**Homelessness in Alaska**

On top of the normal hardships of homeless living, homelessness in Anchorage is particularly difficult, and because of the high cost of living it is a growing population. If a person loses their job and/or home, they cannot simply buy a bus ticket to another town or state and begin anew. Driving requires going through Canada which provides its own difficulties. Flying is cost prohibitive. Therefore once a person becomes homeless in Alaska they are simply stuck here. The winters are incredibly difficult to survive, lasting from mid-September to mid-April. Being homeless in a place with four to five feet of snow covering everything and only a few hours of sunlight a day can be nearly impossible. This, of course, has a severe effect on the immune system and the ability to fight off diseases. A lack of access to basic hygiene and nutrition puts the homeless person at greater risk for contracting such illnesses as strep (Hillman, 2017).

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**Conclusion**

The homeless population of Alaska has suffered a serious blow with this infection. The nature of their situation predisposes them toward contracting a serious illness and the strain of strep bacteria took full advantage of this over the course of several months. It is unfortunate that so many were affected by this outbreak, and even more so it was unfortunate that some lost their lives. It is quite fortunate, however, that there are several teams of health care providers and even a federal CDC team who have taken great strides to combat the outbreak. They have given the needed care for those that are affected and provided the medications and sanitary supplies to centers where the at-risk homeless population congregate. It is a difficult situation that has been dealt with in an impressive and professional manner.

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