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## **URGENT COMMUNICATION**

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To: Directors of Public Health, Health & Social Services Boards  
Consultant in Communicable Disease Control, Health & Social Services Boards

Dear Colleague

### **SUSPECTED CASE OF RABIES IN TAYSIDE, SCOTLAND**

You may be aware from media reports, that a patient with suspected rabies is being treated at Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, Scotland. He was admitted with mild neurological symptoms which have since developed into a progressive illness consistent with a rabies-like illness. Initial laboratory tests were inconclusive for the rabies virus; results from further tests are awaited.

The patient may have been infected with European Bat Lyssavirus (EBL). He is known to have had prolonged close contact with bats over many years, and to have been bitten by a bat at least once during the incubation period for the disease.

Since 1996, EBL has been isolated from two Daubenton's bats in the UK. In September 2002 EBL was isolated from a bat that had bitten an individual in Lancashire, and EBL was also isolated from a bat in Sussex in 1996. Both victims were given post-exposure prophylaxis (vaccination) and no human disease was reported.

EBL is less virulent than the common strain of rabies virus, but it has been associated, very rarely, with human infection in other Northern European countries. All available evidence indicates that the threat from these bats to the general public, or to pets and domestic animals, is extremely low. Bats are naturally timid creatures which are hibernating at this time of year. However, those engaged in bat conservation activities who handle bats routinely are at greater risk. They should be advised to exercise particular care, for example by wearing bite-proof gloves, and they should be vaccinated. If they have not already been vaccinated against rabies, they are advised to come forward for pre-exposure immunisation.

### **Pre-Exposure Immunisation**

Pre-exposure immunisation with human diploid cell rabies is available free from the NHS for certain groups of people listed in the Department of Health's (DH) 1996 Guidance Immunisation Against Infectious Disease, sections 27.3 and 27.4. This list includes licensed bat handlers. Additionally, it is now recommended that the free vaccination should also be offered to people who regularly handle bats, and not just licensed bat handlers. The DH Guidance is currently being updated to reflect this new advice. People continuing to handle bats should also have booster rabies vaccination every 3-5 years.

## **Arrangements For Obtaining Vaccine For Pre-Exposure Immunisation**

Rabies vaccines for pre-exposure immunisation for those at occupational risk is available from the Public Health Laboratory at Belfast City Hospital on 028 90 329241.

## **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis**

As a result of media coverage of this incident, it is possible that some bat handlers will report having been bitten or scratched by a bat. Guidance on treatment for such people can be obtained from the PHLS Virus Reference Laboratory 0208 200 4400. Stocks of vaccine and immunoglobulin for post-exposure immunisation can be obtained from the Public Health Laboratory at Belfast City Hospital on 028 90329241. Current advice is that if such an event had occurred within the previous 2 years, and if the individual in question is fully immunised against rabies, they should be offered 2 doses of vaccine. If, however, the individual is previously unimmunised or incompletely immunised, they should be offered 5 doses of vaccine. For those who are previously unimmunised, and who have been bitten by a bat that is known, or strongly suspected, to be rabid, then immunoglobulin should be offered in addition to a full course of vaccine.

## **Further Information**

The Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has prepared advice on EBL, based on "Frequently Asked Questions", which can be accessed via the advice on rabies generally on the PHLS website at [www.phls.org.uk/topics\\_az/rabies.menu.htm](http://www.phls.org.uk/topics_az/rabies.menu.htm). Should members of the public require information about having bats in their house they can contact Lynne Rendle, Northern Ireland Bat Group on 028 90 383144.

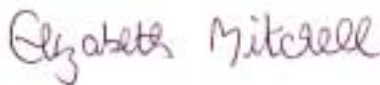
For further information on medical issues you may contact:

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Yours sincerely



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