

Suspected Anthrax Case in Lincoln

By Al J. Laukaitis

March 31, 2000 Lincoln Journal Star

People who came in contact with a jar of suspected anthrax powder Thursday face no danger, said Scott Holmes, chief of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department's environmental health division. "The material was in a container all the time. There was no released material," Holmes said. FBI agents took the substance to the Public Health Laboratory at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha for testing. But Holmes said he doubts the white powder is the real thing. "Anthrax powder is very restrictive access. This is not something that someone would have access to -- we're talking the highest military level personnel only," he said. "The likelihood is very, very small that this is real." Holmes said the jar was not broken and there was no evidence of spillage. Nevertheless, health officials treated the incident as if the powder were real. When police initially suspected a StarTran bus may have been exposed, health officials kept everyone on the bus until they could decide what measures to take. Eventually, the passengers and driver were told to shower and wash their clothes separately. A postal worker who handled the jar was told to do the same. "Even if there was a true exposure this would be adequate protection," Holmes said. And even if the report is false, local and state officials will learn from it. Said John Erickson, the state's first Bioterrorism Surveillance Coordinator. Erickson was recently hired with federal money to help Nebraska develop a statewide plan to respond to any type of bioterrorism emergency. "The potential for future incidents exists", said Erickson, who started his new duties February 22. "I think there are always people out there who are wanting attention or for whatever reasons may see this as an opportunity to get attention," he said. "We do know in the last three years the numbers have increased dramatically, especially in

biological types of threats or incidents."