

The NPHL Takes to the Road

by Steven Hinrichs, M.D., Director

A national effort is underway to rebuild the public health communication and reporting infrastructure at the state level. The goal is to improve the detection and prevention of diseases of public health concern through improving communications with community hospital and independent microbiology laboratories. Much of the effort will be directed toward detection of biological agents used in terrorist activities. We recognize that in the past, little information came back to the laboratories or physicians sending samples to the NPHL and that the process for submitting samples was cumbersome and resulted in expense to the submitter.

As a result, the NPHL has initiated a project with the support of the CDC to develop a mechanism for increasing the coordination of laboratory testing for organisms of public health concern. Our goal is to visit every microbiology laboratory in Nebraska to identify needs and concerns regarding the detection and handling of bioterrorism associated organisms or naturally occurring pathogens of public health interest. Standard protocols will be made available based on the interest and requirements of the laboratory. As part of this effort, we will offer educational opportunities such as workshops and teleconferences in different parts of the state. We will also assist in identifying the availability of courier systems to reduce the cost of submitting specimens.

The process to build a national network of laboratories is referred to as the Laboratory Response Network (LRN). In Nebraska, current plans call for participation by at least one laboratory in each of the six health planning regions of the state. These laboratories will be designated as Level A. A Laboratory Advisory Council (LAC) will be established composed of the Laboratory Director, or designee, from each of the LRN Level A laboratories. Our long term goal is to develop a statewide electronic reporting system that is tied into the office of the State Epidemiologist. Implementation of a statewide laboratory communication system will begin with an auto-fax messaging system from the NPHL to the designated LRN Level A labs. When fully mature, this communication system will involve networking by the telephone, e-mail and finally laboratory-based electronic reporting involving a "real-time" electronic connection. Our system will be evaluated by several criteria specified by the CDC to demonstrate that it has met the standards for a state-wide surveillance system. We anticipate that the system developed in Nebraska will become a "model system" for other states to follow. We look forward to working with the laboratories through out the state and thank you all in advance for your