

Special Pathogens and the Select Agent Rule

By Steven Hinrichs M.D., Director, NPHL

In this issue, Dr. Peter Iwen discusses the regulations and process for the handling of “select agents”, organisms that are of particular concern to the federal government because of their potential use as biological weapons. This situation is a clear indication of how bioterrorism preparedness has affected the everyday work of laboratory technologists, and while no-one enjoys the additional bureaucratic burden of following the complex select agent rules, it’s very obvious that Nebraska laboratorians have taken to heart all of the training and communication that has occurred over the past two years. As an illustration of this point, the public health laboratory has received five isolates of *Francisella tularensis* and two isolates of *Brucella* spp. for confirmation since January. Prior to the war on terrorism, it was typical to receive only one or two *F. tularensis* isolates a year. The point is that we don’t believe Nebraska is under attack by human terrorists, but rather that when gram negative pleomorphic rods appear on a Gram stain, they are not as easily dismissed as a probable *Haemophilus influenzae* with unusual biochemicals, but instead, an astute technologist or director will suggest that the specimen be sent to the state public health laboratory for further identification. And it turns out, the suspicion is fully justified as the numbers indicate.

In coordination with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL), the American Society for Microbiology (ASM) has developed protocols designed to assist clinical microbiology laboratories with techniques for identifying suspicious microorganisms. These Sentinel clinical microbiology laboratory guidelines offer standardized, practical methods to aid microbiologists in ruling out these special pathogens and referring specimens to public health laboratories (LRN Reference Laboratories) for confirmation. These Sentinel laboratory guidelines are the basis for the NPHL’s *Bioterrorism Preparedness “Train the Trainer” Wet Workshops* that we have been hosting throughout the state. The information and training supplied through these workshops are intended to provide the *tools* needed for the laboratorians to become familiar with identifying special pathogens so that they can “recognize, rule-out, or refer” suspicious organism. Please contact Josh Rowland (jrowland@unmc.edu, 402-559-6070) if you are interested in learning more about these workshops.

In the “Meet the Laboratorian” section, the NPHL newsletter recognizes two individuals, Anita Young and Dr. Don Giger, who for many years have provided outstanding service and expertise to the Nebraska medical and laboratory community. In both cases they have now retired. Anita, while working part-time now for the NPHL, is enjoying having more time to sail with her husband, while Don Giger has decided he is too young to retire completely and is still involved in public health matters. While we are grateful for their years of service, their retirement highlights the fact that over 50% of the laboratory workforce will be joining them in the next five years and we all need to recruit young people into our interesting and rewarding field.

Although we have never published any cartoons in our newsletter, I hope everyone will appreciate the inclusion of a laboratory recipe. The information on page 5 was requested by a hospital technologist for purposes of freezing bacterial isolates.