

06/11/2003 Entry: "Four Get Monkeypox Virus From Prairie Dogs"

By TODD RICHMOND, Associated Press Writer

MADISON, Wis. (AP) -- Tests have confirmed that four people in Wisconsin contracted the monkeypox virus after coming into close contact with pet prairie dogs, marking the first time the disease has been discovered in the Western Hemisphere, health officials said Sunday.

The findings at least partially confirm that monkeypox has caused an outbreak of rashes, fevers and chills in people across the upper Midwest since early May. Monkeypox is a viral infection that is related to smallpox.

Fourteen more people in Wisconsin are suspected of suffering from the virus, said Milwaukee Health Commissioner Dr. Seth Foldy. At least 11 more cases in Indiana and three in Illinois are suspected.

The outbreak stems from a batch of prairie dogs that came from a pet distributor in suburban Chicago. It was there that the prairie dogs may have been infected with monkeypox by a Gambian rat - a rodent indigenous to African countries.

The detection of monkeypox in the United States represents a highly unusual discovery. The virus has been found mostly in west African nations - and had never before been seen in the Western Hemisphere.

The human death rate in Africa has ranged from 1 to 10 percent, but Foldy said the virus may be less lethal in the United States, because people are typically better nourished and medical technology is far more advanced.

"We have isolation, soap, running water, sterile dressing materials, we have washing machines," Foldy said. "These are all things that have reduced the prevalence of germs that are spreadable by person-to-person contact."

Still, the disease could be almost impossible to control and more people could become infected if it passes into other indigenous North American animals, Foldy said.

Thirteen of the infected people were around prairie dogs; the other apparently contracted it after handling a sick rabbit that had been around a prairie dog. Foldy said it doesn't appear anyone contracted the virus from another person.

Doctors initially feared they might be facing smallpox, which causes similar symptoms, Foldy said.

But doctors and scientists quickly eliminated that possibility after discovering the people-prairie dog link. Smallpox is found only in humans and cannot be transmitted from animals to people, Foldy said.

Four people, including one as an outpatient, have been treated at Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital in Milwaukee. One has been released and the remaining two were in satisfactory condition Sunday, hospital spokesman Mark McLaughlin said.

"It eventually will clear up as you treat the symptoms," McLaughlin said. "We don't need people to go off the deep end."

Prairie dogs are burrowing herbivores that are commonly found in western rangeland, but their popularity as pets has grown in recent years. Last year 10,000 prairie dogs were shipped out of Texas to become pets, said David Crawford, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Animal Defense, a nonprofit organization that advocates for animal freedom.

Wisconsin agriculture officials took steps Sunday to prevent the possible spread of monkeypox from prairie dogs to other animals. The state Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection issued a warning telling people not to dump prairie dogs into the wild, agency spokeswoman Donna Gilson said.

The agency also told state humane societies to isolate any prairie dogs people bring in.

The Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services issued an emergency order Friday banning the sale, importation and display of prairie dogs.

The Illinois Department of Agriculture has prohibited Phil's Pocket Pets, the suburban Chicago pet distributor, from selling animals until the health of its animals is verified.

Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich on Saturday signed an executive order banning the sale, importation or display of prairie dogs or Gambian rats. The owner of Phil's has given Illinois officials a list of all who bought prairie dogs, Gambian rats or other exotic animals since April 15, the Illinois Department of Public Health said.

No telephone listing could be found for Phil's Pocket Pets Sunday.

SK Exotics, a Milwaukee pet distributor, purchased some of the infected prairie dogs and sold them to two pets stores in the Milwaukee area. Importing and selling prairie dogs in Wisconsin is legal.

More prairie dogs from Villa Park apparently found their way to northern Wisconsin through a Wausau swap meet, said Dr. Mark Wegner, chief of the Wisconsin Communicable Disease Epidemiology Section.

Tammy Kautzer's farm in central Wisconsin has been quarantined because she purchased two prairie dogs for pets from the Wausau swap meet.

Less than two weeks after the purchase, her 3-year-old daughter, Schyan, was bitten by one of the animals and spent seven days in the hospital with a 103-degree fever, swollen eyes and red bumps on her skin.

"It was getting a little scary. She wasn't doing well," Kautzer said. "Three days straight (in the hospital), she just slept and cried. She'd tell me how scared she was."

Kautzer and her husband, Steve, also started to develop similar red bumps, but they and their daughter are recovering.

Crawford said prairie dogs are too aggressive to make good pets.

"You're doing something that is in total disregard for the natural order of things, bringing these animals out of their communities and putting them in artificial environments," he said. "It isn't a surprise to me that nature has this little surprise waiting."