Environmental Health Lab and International Collaboration Save Lives in Panama

In October 2006, Panama declared a national epidemic alert after people began dying from an unexplained illness that affected the renal system and caused neurological damage.

Scientists from CDC's Environmental Health Laboratory partnered with representatives from the Pan American Health Organization, the Gorgas Memorial Institute, Santo Tomas Hospital, the Caja del Seguro Social and Panama's Ministry of Health to investigate what was causing people to become sick and die.

Using advanced laboratory science and innovative techniques, CDC scientists found diethylene glycol (DEG) in cough and anti-allergy syrup formulated and distributed throughout Panama. DEG is a toxic substance that can cause renal failure and subsequent death. The ingestion of the contaminated cough syrup was implicated in 92 confirmed cases of severe acute renal and/or neurologic illness; of these cases, 51 people died. Thousands of others were potentially exposed to DEG through ingestion of the cough and anti-allergy syrup but fortunately did not become ill enough to require hospitalization.

As a result of CDC laboratory's work, the Panamanian health authorities quickly recalled 60,000 bottles of the contaminated medications, which potentially saved many lives. The CDC laboratory also validated the method for the measurement of urinary DEG, which will be useful for identifying any future potential victims of DEG poisoning.

For more information about CDC at Work, please contact us at (202) 245-0600 or go to http://www.cdc.gov/washington/.

117065