"LOST" VIALS OF SMALLPOX

Scientist Finds Forgotten Smallpox Vials in Fridge

On July 1, 2014, vials marked "variola", the virus that causes smallpox, were found when a fridge was being cleaned out as part of the effort to move a National Institutes of Health campus to new location. The vials were immediately secured and a CDC team was dispatched to retrieve the vials. No exposure to smallpox is suspected, but the discovery is still alarming. There are only two heavily secured locations where smallpox is supposed to exist in the world so the fact that vials of a dangerous virus were just sitting forgotten in a fridge has raised many issues that should be investigated.

Problem

What

Problem(s)

Lost vials of smallpox, potential spread of smallpox

When

Date

Discovered July 1, 2014

Where

Facility, site

Bethesda, MD

Unit, area, equipment

Vials marked "variola"

Task being performed

Moving National Institutes of Health campus to new location

Impact to the Goals

Safety

Potential for smallpox outbreak

Customer Service

Negative publicity

Production/ Schedule

Delay in lab relocation schedule

Labor/ Time

Investigation required

Analysis

Potential for people to be exposed to smallpox

Evidence: Workers found smallpox in unsecured lab.

Most people have not been exposed to smallpox

Evidence: Public health records.

US stopped smallpox vaccines in 1972

Evidence: Public health records.

Last smallpox case in US occurred in 1949

Evidence: Public health records.

Smallpox was eradicated worldwide

Evidence: Public health records.

Safety Goal

Potential for smallpox outbreak

Effect

Customer Service Goal

Negative publicity

Production/ Schedule Goal

Delay in lab relocation schedule

Labor/ Time Goal

Investigation required

Solution

The final step of the Cause Mapping process is to use the Cause Map to develop and implement solutions to reduce the risk of a similar problem occurring in the future. In this example, the immediate problem was addressed by moving the vials to a secured lab. Once scientists are done studying the vials, the contents and all traces of the virus will be destroyed. Longer-term solutions will likely include ensuring that all government laboratory storerooms are inventoried to ensure that no other potentially dangerous vials have been "lost". Inventory procedures should also be reviewed to ensure they are adequate.