

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

This Is Public Health!

Coldwater, MI. *What is public health?* Public health is the science of protecting and improving the health of communities. Public health is accomplished each time a local health department staff member works to provide education, administer a vaccination, promote healthy lifestyles or track disease outbreaks. *When is public health practiced?* Every day! *And how do I know when it is going on?* Well... you may not know. Much of public health detection goes undetected by the public. Take for example last year's cryptosporidium outbreak that occurred as a result of a barn fire. The outbreak and much of the efforts of the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency to contain it were done quietly and behind the scenes. Yet, this outbreak was the first of its kind in the nation – it was the first known outbreak of cryptosporidium due to occupational exposure of firefighters. The outbreak was a featured presentation at the 12th Annual Michigan Communicable Disease Conference held in Lansing (May, 2012). It was also the focus of an article which was featured in the March 2012 issue of the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR - a publication of the Centers for Disease Control) and the April 2012 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA).

The article, "[Outbreak of Cryptosporidiosis Associated With a Firefighting Response—Indiana and Michigan](#)," describes the step-by-step process followed by public health practitioners (administrators, nurses and sanitarians alike) to identify the source of the illness and keep the disease from spreading. Steps included: interviewing firefighters who were exposed or possibly exposed; testing water and stool samples to identify the specific strain and type of disease; coordinating activities between multiple local health offices, the Michigan Department of Community Health, Indiana State Department of Health, Michigan

State University and the Centers for Disease Control; and educating all involved on how to limit their exposure and protect themselves from future contamination.

According to Jo Ann Wilczynski, Prevention Disease Director and article contributor “This outbreak was unique. Firefighters from three counties and two states were involved, which meant our activities had to be coordinated across multiple offices, jurisdictions and agencies. It was also unique because it is the first report of *Cryptosporidium* being a potential occupational hazard for rural firefighters. In total, 20 of the 34 firefighters became ill with gastrointestinal symptoms; three of six tested were positive for *Cryptosporidium*. Responding to the outbreak required a multi-disciplinary team made up of nurses, sanitarians, administrators, health educators and epidemiologists – working together to address the emerging situation. Our staff performance was outstanding!”

Cryptosporidiosis is a disease that causes diarrhea. It is caused by microscopic parasites called *Cryptosporidium*. These parasites can live in the intestine of humans and animals. The disease is passed in the stool of an infected person or animal. Both the disease and the parasite are commonly known as "Crypto." The cryptosporidium outbreak was a result of a fire at a farm where firefighters were rescuing calves that fell into a manure pit. Crypto is commonly found in cattle manure. Jo Ann states “The circumstances were right for contamination, given that it was an extremely hot June day, the contaminated firefighting gear was heavy and warm and the firefighters were known to wash up in water that came from a pond that was also infected.”

Kim Brown from Prevention Services and Karen Griffith from Environmental Health were also acknowledged in the article for their contributions. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency’s Board of Health recognized Prevention and Environmental Health staff for their surveillance efforts at the July 26th board meeting held in Three Rivers, Michigan.



(Left to right) Jo Ann Wilczynski, Prevention Services Director, Rebecca Burns, Environmental Health Director and Steve Todd, Health Officer accept the certificates of recognition from the Board of Health on behalf of the prevention and environmental divisions. Staffs were recognized for their surveillance efforts during the 2011 Cryptosporidium Outbreak.

The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community provides a wide array of public health services designed to protect the public's health, promote healthy behaviors and prevent disease and premature death. They are provided by well-trained staffs who are dedicated to serving their communities. And while they may go about unnoticed, what they provide is essential to the public's health and wellbeing. To learn more about public health and its services, contact your local county office or visit the health department's website at www.bhsj.org.

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