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## NEW MEXICO HEALTH ALERT NETWORK (HAN) ADVISORY

### New Mexico Department of Health Warns of Recent Cases of Wound Botulism in Heroin Users

May 12, 2017

#### Background

New Mexico Department of Health announces a suspect case of wound botulism in a heroin user from New Mexico. Four previous confirmed cases were announced in July and September 2016. All New Mexico clinicians should be on the alert for cases of wound botulism, especially in injection drug users, specifically subcutaneous or intradermal injection of drugs (“skin popping”) and black tar heroin users. Report any suspect case to the Department of Health (24/7/365) at (505) 827-0006 so that antitoxin can be obtained and administered as soon as possible, if indicated.

#### Update

The most recent patient is a heroin user and the suspected source of infection is a soiled skin injection site or abscess. The previous four cases were skin poppers, black tar heroin users, and had either occult or visible abscesses at injection sites. Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*, which is commonly found in soil. These organisms grow best in anaerobic conditions. The bacteria form durable heat-resistant spores which allow them to survive in a dormant state until exposed to conditions that can support their growth.

Wound botulism results when *Clostridium botulinum* spores are introduced into a wound or abscess. Under the anaerobic conditions present in a wound, the spores multiply, germinate, and secrete toxin. The Department of Health is investigating to determine if there is ongoing risk to other individuals and asks that all healthcare providers maintain a high index of suspicion for botulism in any patient presenting with any of the following signs and symptoms who also reports heroin use.

The classic signs and symptoms of botulism include:

- double vision
- blurred vision
- drooping eyelids
- slurred speech
- difficulty swallowing
- dry mouth
- muscle weakness/descending paralysis
- difficulty breathing/shortness of breath

#### EPIDEMIOLOGY AND RESPONSE

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These are all signs and symptoms of muscle paralysis caused by the bacterial toxin. If untreated, progression of clinical illness could include paralysis of the respiratory muscles, arms, legs, and trunk and subsequent death. Healthcare providers should consider the diagnosis if the patient's history (e.g., injection drug use, sudden onset of above-mentioned signs and/or symptoms) and physical examination suggest botulism.

The Department of Health recommends all clinicians:

- Be alert for cases of wound botulism, especially in injection drug users.
- Report any suspect case to the Department of Health 24/7/365 at (505)827-0006 so that antitoxin can be obtained and administered as soon as possible if indicated.
- Warn persons who inject drugs about the risk of wound botulism and inform them of the signs and symptoms so that they obtain medical care immediately.