

Tuberculosis and your Professional Responsibility

Health care workers in regular contact with patients and laboratory workers handling specimens could potentially be exposed to tuberculosis (TB). When entering Health and Social Care (HSC) employment staff, as above, are screened with regard to risk of TB. Those who are non-immune, and in an identified high risk group, are vaccinated, thus greatly reducing their risk of contracting TB.

If a person does become infected with TB, presenting symptoms can be:

- persistent cough lasting for more than 3 weeks
- coughing up of sputum or phlegm for more than 3 weeks
- coughing up of blood
- unexplained weight loss
- unexplained high temperature or fever
- other persistent unexplained symptoms about which cause concern.

If at any time you develop any of the above, please contact the Occupational Health Department at once for advice. Early reporting of symptoms will enable prompt diagnosis and treatment if you have TB. This will reduce the risk of spreading the disease to others such as your family, colleagues and vulnerable people in your place of work. Also if you become more vulnerable to infection due to illness or commence any treatment that may affect your immunity, please contact the Occupational Health Service for advice, since you may in such circumstances need to move to a lower risk area of work for your own protection.

Staff who have lived or worked with local people in high risk countries* for more than 3 months should be particularly alert to the possibility of developing TB within the subsequent 5 years. If you visit a high risk country for longer than 3 months, or if you may have been exposed to TB, whilst working in a high risk clinical setting in a TB endemic country, on your return to the UK you should contact your Occupational Health Service so that screening can be arranged. This will also apply to staff who have had regular contact with TB patients and/or TB infected materials in a high risk clinical setting for 4 weeks or more.

Your Professional Responsibility

As well as a contractual obligation, health care workers have a professional responsibility to protect the health of both individual patients and the wider community. All the professional regulatory bodies require registrants to alert their employer if they are aware of any issues which would put individuals in their care at risk. This includes risks from infections such as TB.

It is important for your safety and that of your family, your patients and your colleagues, to ensure early diagnosis and any necessary follow-up treatment in the event of you contracting TB to prevent its spread.

If there are any issues arising from this article which cause you any concern or that you wish to discuss please contact your Trust's Occupational Health Service.

* Countries/territories with an estimated incidence rate of 40 per 100,000 or greater are considered to be high risk countries for tuberculosis - countries are listed by the Health Protection Agency at www.hpa.org.uk