

Fourth death from anthrax intensifies probe into mystery

by John J. Goldman
and Edmund Sanders
Los Angeles Times

Anthrax claimed a fourth life Wednesday as government leaders stepped up their investigation amid mounting criticism that they were slow to appreciate the magnitude of the attacks and sent conflicting signals about how Americans should protect themselves.

The death of Kathy T. Nguyen, a 61-year-old New York hospital worker, remained the focus of the investigation, largely because the source of her infection is unknown. Unlike other victims, Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant, is not known to have handled mail or a contaminated letter.

"This is a very puzzling mystery," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "So all bets are off. Public health officials (have) to do a real full-court press on trying to track this down. This is critical."

Nguyen died early Wednesday at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan after coming to the facility's emergency room Sunday night.

She became the fourth anthrax fatality in a month, following the deaths of a Florida newspaper photo editor and two Washington postal workers. There are 12 other confirmed cases, according to the CDC.

A second person at the Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital - where Nguyen worked in a medical supply room - was being tested for the skin form of the disease, said New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. The woman, who has a suspicious lesion, was taking antibiotics as a precaution, but results were not expected until Thursday.

"The death has caused us to rededicate our efforts and ourselves," said Tommy G. Thompson, secretary of Health and Human Services, which, he said, now has 450 employees working on the crisis, including more than 150 at the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Asked if the government believes it has contained the threat posed by the current anthrax outbreak, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft said Wednesday there has been no progress to report in the investigation and no arrests were imminent.

"I can't say that people have any right to think that the risks have abated as it relates either to the anthrax or other terrorist risks," Ashcroft said.

Dr. Neil Cohen, New York City's Health Commissioner, said Nguyen and the other hospital worker being tested for skin anthrax worked in different areas of the outpatient hospital.

So far, tests for anthrax at the hospital and at Nguyen's third-floor apartment have been negative, Giuliani said at a City Hall news conference.

Detectives and experts in tracing disease patterns were trying to reconstruct how Nguyen spent her last seven days - a task complicated by the fact that investigators were unable to speak with her once she was placed on a respirator.

At Nguyen's brick tenement-style apartment building in a heavily Latino Bronx neighborhood, investigators tripped over trick-or-treaters in Halloween costumes as they continued to question neighbors about Nguyen's activities.

A swab of the clothing Nguyen wore when she checked into Lenox Hill Hospital showed possible signs of anthrax, though tests are not yet completed.

Health officials plan to conduct an autopsy to analyze the type of bacteria that killed Nguyen and determine if it matches any anthrax recovered in contaminated letters or from other places, said White House press secretary Ari Fleischer.

Meanwhile in New Jersey, officials said a fifth postal worker appeared to have skin anthrax, though the case has not been confirmed by the CDC. A mail processing plant in the southern

part of the Garden State serving 159 local post offices was closed while investigators searched for traces of spores.

The 54-year-old man developed a skin lesion on Oct. 13 and blood tests were positive for antibodies to anthrax. Results from a biopsy of the lesion were not yet available.

Acting New Jersey Health Commissioner George T. DiFerdinando said the man was responding well to antibiotics and was expected to return to work by the end of the week.

In the capital, a key lawmaker Wednesday proposed sanitizing all 200 billion pieces of mail delivered annually to kill anthrax and other harmful bacteria.

"In my view, all mail should be irradiated from here on out," said Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D. "The sooner the better. The quicker we can acquire the equipment to do that, the better."

He said he did not know how much such treatment would cost.

On Tuesday, postal officials said they would need \$2.5 billion to pay for its plan to irradiate all government mail and all mail dropped off in public places, such as collection boxes.

Also Wednesday, the State Department said it found anthrax in several more mailbags at an overseas U.S. embassy, this time in Lithuania. Earlier this week, traces were detected in a pouch to Lima, Peru.

But health officials in Washington said Wednesday they were encouraged that there have been no new suspected anthrax cases in the capital and that three mail workers with inhalation anthrax continue to improve.

Three neighborhood post offices that had tested positive for anthrax reopened Wednesday after being decontaminated.

Ivan Walks, the city's chief health officer, who earlier this week said he saw "no light at the end of the tunnel," said Wednesday that the anthrax crisis in the capital appears to have peaked.



KRT PHOTO BY CHUCK KENNEDY

"When you've got 25 billion pieces of mail out there (since the first anthrax outbreak) and one possible contamination ... we still think you ought to open your mail, and you ought to use the postal system," said Tom Ridge, director of Homeland Security. Ridge recently held meetings with city mayors and state governors about possible precautions to take during the war on terrorism.

Profanities, vulgarities, and other 'malarky' in the media: It's still a f*#@#!% big deal

by Robert Philpot
Knight Ridder Newspapers

In the early '90s, TV producer Steven Bochco broke some barriers with his show "NYPD Blue," which featured the strongest language yet heard on a network-TV series. In Bochco's new series, "Philly," he had proposed crossing another line by having a character utter an eight-letter synonym for cattle manure - or more accurately, for "malarky."

Bochco's colleague and rival, Aaron Sorkin, sought to break a similar taboo on "The West Wing" by having one of his characters use the name of God in vain, in a way many people see as the harshest and most objectionable manner possible.

Bochco's and Sorkin's plans merited a front-page story in a Sunday edition of The New York Times in early September, before terrorist attacks and war began dominating front pages. It seems odd to think, in the wake of shocking death and violence, that foul language can still be such a big deal that it merited the cover of the biggest edition of one of the largest papers in the country.

Which raises the question: Why is it that to many people, harsh language is realistic and normal, while to many others, it's so objectionable that the mere suggestion of its use earned this sort of attention?

"I think there is a long history of there needing to be a taboo," says Wendalyn Nichols, editorial director of Random House Reference. "Very few cultures don't have some taboo words in their language."

U.S. culture has a lot of them, none of which can be used in this article. So let's avoid that by breaking the strong language down into three categories: profanity (taking the name of God in vain and/or suggesting someone should go someplace other than heaven), obscenity (words rooted in references to sexual acts) and vulgarity (words rooted in references to bodily wastes and associated body parts).

Admonitions against taking the name of God in vain go back to the earliest books of the Old Testament and the Torah, and are seen by some people to be the worst form of swearing. But others find obscenities to be more offensive.

"There's been some shifts in what has happened in what people think of as the most egregious sort of swearing," Nichols says. "Once, even to say the name of God was blasphemous. And a lot of the terms that we use now that are considered offensive were the terms that were once used (legitimately) to actually refer to certain body parts."

So obscenities and vulgarities came along much later than profanity, right? Not necessarily, Nichols says.

"We've been swearing since we learned how to talk," she says. "There's a societal need for taboo. It defines who we are, who's pushing the edges."

But even some of those who swear - which, by the way, includes the author of this article - have their limits. Most people wouldn't swear around their boss, and certainly not around a prospective employer; a parent might have a potty-mouth, but that doesn't mean he or she wants to hear foul language coming from the mouths of children.

"That brings up the question, 'Why is this an adult privilege?'," says James O'Connor, author of "Cuss Control, The Complete Book on How To Curb Your Cursing" (Three Rivers Press, \$12.95). "Why can't the kids swear if you swear? Why is it only for grown-ups?"

One parent's answer is that it shouldn't be for grown-ups, either - even though she says that she uses strong language.

"When I cuss and use bad words - and I'm not going to even tell you how many times I use bad words - but in my own life, it's a cop-out," says Marty Wynne, a Dallas professional woman and single mother who has an 8-year-old daughter. "It's a failure, it's a stupid failure to use my brain to find a way that expresses really what I'm feeling instead of using the old standbys, and I use the standbys because when I use them, I know that anybody within earshot will understand what I said."

Wynne says that after her daughter asked her why she can't swear, the two started coming up with substitute words and phrases for well-known epithets: "Horse feathers," for instance, or "gosh."

"The funnier the word is, it's almost more fun to use than the bad word," Wynne

says. "Because horses don't have feathers, every time I use the words, it makes me stop and laugh, and we've avoided using a word that shouldn't be said."

O'Connor, who is also a parent, adds that he believes words can hurt.

"It's the attitude and the tone behind the words," he says. "If it's used in an abrasive manner, then it's not civil, it's not polite, and it's not friendly."

O'Connor says most people start swearing around their friends in casual conversation. Then the words begin seeping out in other situations, where there are different levels of swearing.

"Let's say your computer goes down, and you swear at the machinery," he says. "The person next to you might be sympathetic, and might laugh. But if you swear at the person, he's not going to laugh." Which is why one of his tips for "cuss control" is to be patient. "Relax," he says. "So what if your stapler's out of staples?"

But he also believes that the entertainment media should share some of the blame. Swearing didn't become a regular occurrence in mainstream movies till 1966's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?," and although certain words made it under the radars of TV networks' standards and practices departments, the increase in strong language didn't happen till "NYPD Blue's" 1993 debut. Now cursing regularly makes it on the air at radio stations, and it's practically inevitable on premium-cable TV.

"Television through the years has had incredible dramas, good comedies, tense scenes without swearing," O'Connor says. "Now it's 'The Sopranos' and 'Sex and the City' setting the standard. Both those shows are interesting in themselves. But the language in 'The Sopranos' is excessive and unnecessary. With 'Sex and the City,' my objection to that show is that you have these women in a fancy restaurant, and they're using this foul language."

But Bochco, the creator and executive producer of "NYPD Blue" and "Philly," says there are reasons to use strong language in his dramas.

"For me, the issue goes to context," Bochco said in a telephone interview. "There are some shows where I think pro-

fanity is appropriate; other shows where I wouldn't think it is. That's a judgment call I've made in the past, and that I continue to make happily.

"Over the years, all the mail I've gotten over profanity or sexuality in 'NYPD Blue' (often says) 'Why do you need to use that language? Why do you need to show bare butts? Can't you tell your story without that stuff? Do you really need it?' My answer always is, 'No, I don't need it. And yes, I can tell that story without those things.' Those things are an actual creative choice that we feel the use of, in the context of this adult police drama, lends a certain degree of reality to a genre which, up to that point, had been pretty heavily mined and really wasn't contemporary anymore."

Strong language can also help color an audience's reaction to a character, if a study by Southern Connecticut State University professor Patricia Kalbaugh is any indication. The psychology professor had subjects read some written material and judge the authors' personality based on that material.

"I had inserted some stronger words in some of the sentences," she says. "So for instance, one person might be reading 'The man put his head on the table,' while another might read, 'The jerk put his head on the table.' When they read the one that used the stronger language, they judged that person to be less intelligent, less educated, less employable." Kalbaugh adds that although many intelligent, educated, employable people use foul language, harsh words can give a bad first impression.

"It's based on a stereotype, much as many negative judgments are based on stereotypes," she says. And she adds that although she used many words that are more taboo than 'jerk,' even the mild language resulted in negative impressions.

There's still enough worry about what's offensive, though, that swearing is hushed in places where it's hard to imagine people would mind. Rap and hard-rock songs are routinely altered for radio stations, even though many people who listen to those stations a) know exactly what's being said, b) might actually own the unedited recordings and c) have the freedom to change the station if they so desire. Cable network

Comedy Central bleeps some, strong language out of shows such as "South Park" and "The Daily Show," even though many people who watch those shows probably use similar or even stronger language.

And as more barriers break down, sometimes the media sends a mixed message. The Star-Telegram has a strong policy against harsh language in editorial copy, yet some still-frowned-upon words slip into ads (especially movie ads) and sometimes even comic strips, simply because these words have become so common, they're beginning to lose their impact. Most daily newspapers have similar policies, although they can be bent in extraordinary circumstances: After the World Trade Center was attacked, the San Francisco Examiner ran a front-page photo of the twin towers on fire, accompanied only by one very angry word addressed at the attackers.

"All of this is part of the evolution of language in our society," O'Connor says. "If you picked up a newspaper or Time magazine from the Vietnam War, you wouldn't see this. ... It's also part of the evolution of communication - we have cellphones, fax machines, e-mail and the Internet. But as communication gets better, the language gets worse."

Bochco has found that there are still barriers, though, and his efforts to add harsher words to "NYPD Blue" have been nixed by ABC's standards and practices department.

"I actually would have thought, with 'NYPD Blue' succeeding as it did, that that would have significantly loosened the standards, and it doesn't seem to have done so," he says. What he finds odd is that he can use a word that's meant to insult somebody, while he can't use one that basically means, "That's a lie."

So what would happen if, somehow, the people who are trying to quit swearing managed to succeed - and then that caught on, and eventually, everybody stopped?

"I think we'd find a new way to do it," says Nichols, the Random House editorial director. "I think if our current crop of words lost their impact, we'd come up with new words, because we've done it all along."