

# Opinion: Salmonella outbreak illustrates importance of public health programs

By Dr. Marty Fenstershelb and Dr. Sara Cody

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Lately, there's been a lot of alarming news about the national outbreak of Salmonella Typhimurium and people getting sick because of eating certain peanut butter and peanut-butter products. The recent recall of cookie dough products affected 13 schools in Santa Clara County. This outbreak is a reminder of the critical role our Public Health Department plays in protecting the health and safety of Santa Clara County's 1.8 million residents.

Nationally, there have been nearly 500 salmonella cases reported in 43 states. In California there have been more than 60 reported cases, including one confirmed case in Santa Clara County. Although most people who get salmonella will get better on their own, others are not so fortunate. Of those infected in this recent outbreak, more than 100 have been hospitalized and seven have died. While these illnesses and others like it are serious, they can be prevented and contained — if local public health departments and other agencies responsible for response are robust enough to act.

In this outbreak, initial reports of illness come to local health departments from community health care providers. The ability of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and state health departments to understand the scope of the problem and respond is only as good as the information that the local health departments can collect and report. If our capacity to rapidly identify, investigate and prevent infection is diminished, so is the national response against the spread of infectious diseases. Local public health departments are the front lines of defense when disease breaks out.

Salmonella is just one of 89 different diseases that are tracked by your Public Health Department. We receive more than 900 reports of confirmed food-borne illnesses each year. Almost once a week we are investigating a disease outbreak. The staff of your Public Health Department is on call 24 hours a day, working to keep our community safe from these potentially dangerous outbreaks. Right now the news is about food-borne illnesses, but over the next year and at any given time, we will be dealing with many more public health concerns including meningitis, tuberculosis, measles, sexually transmitted diseases and whooping cough.

Much of what we do is invisible to the general public. So, why does the work of public health matter? Because when it comes to disease outbreaks, immediate actions are taken to protect the health and well-being of every one of us. Those

actions include surveillance of diseases, investigation of cases and following up with people who may have been exposed. When it comes to contagious diseases, our local public health department will provide medications and, if needed, will restrict people from going to school or work until they are no longer contagious. This work is about protecting the health of our community and preventing disease, illness and injury. Everyone in our county wants and expects to be safe from a communicable disease, and we believe they deserve this protection.

Maintaining a strong and stable public health infrastructure is critical to keeping Santa Clara County a safe, healthy place to live. It is an essential part of the front line of defense for the well-being and safety of this community. And yet, even with a new president and heartening promises of commitment and investment in infrastructure and health care, public health departments are facing very serious fiscal challenges and budget shortfalls. The work of public health is too important to continue to under-fund. The work of public health is too important to overlook. The work of public health is just too important to each and every one of us.

Dr. Marty Fenstersheib is Santa Clara County's health officer. Dr. Sara Cody is a deputy health officer and the communicable disease controller for Santa Clara County. They wrote this article for the Mercury News.

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