

November, 2002

Dear Hospital CEO:

This letter is to update you on a number of New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) initiatives that were designed to better prepare New York State to respond to potential bioterrorism events. The original initiatives were transmitted in a letter that was distributed in February, 2002 (to review this letter, see <https://commerce.health.state.ny.us/hpn>). In that letter you were asked to immediately:

- work “cooperatively and proactively” with your local health departments in preparedness planning efforts;
- report communicable disease data and when requested “syndromic” surveillance data to the state and local health departments;
- assess your readiness to respond to a smallpox outbreak including the ability to institute effective febrile rash illness triage in your emergency department; to obtain appropriate personal protective equipment (e.g. N95 respirators) for selected ED staff; to evaluate the effectiveness of your negative pressure, airborne infection isolation rooms; and to provide specific training on smallpox to all hospital staff.
- ensure that you and appropriate hospital staff gain access to the NYSDOH Health Provider Network (HPN).

In your continued effort to prepare for a potential bioterrorism event, please carefully review and take the necessary steps to implement the following critical items.

General Hospital Preparedness

- **BT Coordinator.** Designate a hospital Bioterrorism Preparedness Planning Coordinator and an alternate to be the point persons for communication with the state and local health departments, other hospitals and health care providers, and emergency management agencies. These individuals must be provided access to the NYSDOH Health Provider Network (HPN). The following contact information must be entered into the Communications Directory on the HPN by your hospital’s HPN Coordinator for these important roles: 24/7 telephone, fax, pager and email contact information for the coordinator and alternate. Please enter this information on the HPN no later than **December 12, 2002.**
- **Link to Local Health Department.** Continue to enhance communication with your local health department commissioner/public health director. A list of local health department officials is enclosed (Enclosure 1). The local health departments play a key role in bioterrorism preparedness in New York. The local health commissioner/public health director is the official empowered to invoke quarantine and other powers authorized by the Public Health Law. In a public health emergency, they, the County Executive and the county emergency management agency will direct the emergency response.

Hospital Smallpox Response Planning

- **All hospitals need to be prepared to care for a suspect case of smallpox.** Review and incorporate the “Guidelines for Management of a Suspect Case of Smallpox in Acute Care Hospitals” (Enclosure 2) into your standard operating procedures. These guidelines, based on guidelines developed by the New York City Department of Health with input from the NYSDOH, provide detailed information on procedures for febrile rash illness triage, differential diagnosis of febrile rash illness, and care of suspect smallpox cases and their contacts. Hospital staff in the following units, at a minimum, should review and incorporate these guidelines into their daily routine: administration, emergency department, ambulatory care, general medical and pediatric inpatient units, infection control, infectious disease, nursing, engineering and facility management. NYSDOH personnel will ask to see hospital protocols based on these guidelines when visiting facilities. These guidelines will be periodically updated, revised documents will be posted on the HPN.

- Isolation Room Survey. A critical element of emergency preparedness is ensuring the ability to isolate patients with conditions that may be transmitted via airborne droplet nuclei (e.g., smallpox, tuberculosis). Please give your prompt attention to the enclosed **Airborne Infection Isolation Room Survey** (Enclosure 3). This survey is to be completed by Plant Management/ Engineering staff in consultation with Infection Control and Hospital Epidemiology, is available on the Health Provider Network (HPN) and should be entered electronically. To expedite this process, your hospital's NYPORTS coordinator has been given access to the survey on the HPN. Links to the electronic survey and instructions for data entry are found in the News Bulletins section of the HPN Home Page - located at the following secure Internet address: <https://commerce.health.state.ny.us/hpn>

Please submit the completed survey data to the Department electronically by **Thursday, December 12, 2002**.

- Smallpox diagnosis poster. Staff in the emergency department, ambulatory clinics, infection control, hospital epidemiology and infectious disease departments should be familiar with the enclosed poster (10 copies provided) entitled "Evaluating Patients for Smallpox, Acute, Generalized Vesicular or Pustular Rash Illness Protocol" developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Enclosure 4). This poster should be posted prominently in staff rooms and examination rooms in the emergency room and other ambulatory care areas of the hospital. Additional copies may be obtained by calling the NYSDOH at 518-473-4436.

Pre-event Smallpox vaccination for health care workers at acute care hospitals

At this time, we are still awaiting the final federal policy on smallpox vaccination for health care workers prior to the occurrence of any smallpox cases. The Department has prepared the enclosed, "Hospital Healthcare Response Team Smallpox Vaccination Guidelines." These guidelines are based on the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) at CDC and contain guidance for hospital-based smallpox health care teams that would be eligible to receive smallpox vaccination (Enclosure 5). You should review these guidelines and recommendations and begin to identify staff who would comprise your Smallpox Health Care Response Team. Healthcare workers should be selected based on job categories that would be required to care for the *initial* smallpox cases. This vaccine program is voluntary. Any person agreeing to be vaccinated should be available to participate in the care of a suspect or confirmed smallpox patient. As the incidence of adverse effects is less among those who have been previously vaccinated, efforts should be made to target persons who have received at least one prior dose. In the initial phases of smallpox vaccination, state and local health departments would likely conduct the vaccination clinics.

Although the final decisions on the parameters of this pre-event smallpox vaccine program have not yet been finalized by the federal government, hospitals should begin to prepare by forming a core planning group now with staff from hospital administration, infectious diseases, infection control, employee health, mental health, emergency preparedness, legal, human resources and other appropriate departments to assist in the planning, roll-out and maintenance of the program. Please also assign a liaison to communicate directly with your local health department and the NYSDOH in regard to the pre-event smallpox vaccination program. It is strongly recommended that this be the bioterrorism coordinator designated for your hospital. (See process for designating smallpox vaccine program liaison under the BT Coordinator item in this letter).

Your cooperation and assistance in this critical endeavor is most appreciated. The State and local health departments will continue to need and request your assistance to ensure coordinated planning and implementation processes. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact your local health department or the NYSDOH at (866) 325-7743 or email outreach@health.state.ny.us

It is my expectation that your hospital has, or soon will, complete each of these tasks. I strongly urge you to complete these critical preparedness steps as soon as possible, if you have not already done so. Enclosed is a list of the vital tasks that I have asked you to complete (Enclosure 6). Thank you for your assistance in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Antonia C. Novello M.D. M.P.H. Dr.P.H." in a cursive style.

Antonia C. Novello, M.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H.
Commissioner of Health

Enclosures

cc: Regional Health Directors
County Health Commissioners/Public Health Directors

ENCLOSURES

- Enclosure 1 Local health department Contact List
- Enclosure 2 Guidelines for Management of a Suspect case of Smallpox in Health Care Hospitals
- Enclosure 3 Airborne Infection Isolation Room Survey
- Enclosure 4 Smallpox Poster
- Enclosure 5 Hospital Health Care Response Team Smallpox Vaccination Guidelines – NYSDOH
- Enclosure 6 Hospital Emergency Preparedness and Smallpox Response Planning Tasks –
 NYSDOH