

Capitol's anthrax scare shuts 12 Senate offices

By Martin Merzer & James Kuhnenn
Knight Ridder Newspapers

WASHINGTON (KRT) — Hundreds of Capitol employees submitted to tests on Tuesday for possible exposure to anthrax — and other lethal diseases — and began taking antibiotics after scientists confirmed that deadly anthrax spores contaminated a Senate office building.

Authorities closed 12 Senate offices and an entire wing of the eight-story Hart Senate Office Building pending an inspection of the ventilation system. Congressional employees formed long lines for nasal-swab tests and medication.

"Now, we know we are dealing with an actual anthrax situation," said Lt. Dan Nichols, a spokesman for the Capitol police force.

As a further precaution, federal health officials said, congressional employees and others possibly exposed elsewhere to anthrax were being screened for additional diseases that might have spread.

The anthrax scare reached the Capitol on Monday when an aide to Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., opened a tainted letter and white powder spilled out. No Capitol employee has developed symptoms of the disease or tested positive for it, police said.

No additional cases were reported in New York or Florida, and the infant son of an ABC News producer is recovering from an anthrax

skin infection. So is a 73-year-old Florida man who has the more dangerous respiratory version.

However, two more people were hospitalized in South Florida and tested for anthrax — an 8-year-old boy with a suspicious skin infection and a 23-year-old former intern at American Media Inc., the Boca Raton, Fla., company that first confronted anthrax.

Authorities do not know who sent the anthrax. The strain found in some of the cases was extremely potent, an indication that those responsible had access to sophisticated scientific knowledge and equipment, according to lawmakers briefed by law enforcement officials.

In New Jersey, two Trenton-area postal workers who feared they had been exposed to the disease tested negative, a spokesman for the state's Department of Health and Senior Services said.

FBI Director Robert Mueller said the FBI had received more than 2,300 reports this month of suspected incidents involving anthrax or other dangerous substances, and nearly all were false alarms or fakes. At the State Department, one report Tuesday of suspicious powder in a bathroom turned out to be a cleanser.

Knight Ridder Newspapers correspondents Seth Borenstein in Washington & Tom Avril in Trenton, N.J. contributed to this report.
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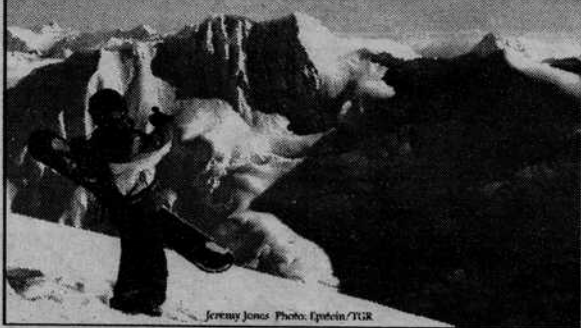
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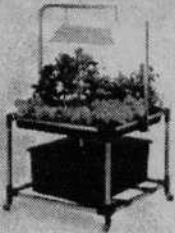
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