October 6, 2015

Dear Emergency Department Director:

It has come to our attention that several people have received rabies vaccine unnecessarily in emergency departments (EDs) in Allegheny County. We are committed to preventing human rabies in the county and are glad that physicians are cognizant of the risk of disease. But unnecessary vaccination incurs considerable expense and time on the part of patients and providers. As detailed below, in almost any case, post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) can be delayed for days until the animal is either tested for rabies virus or observed for symptoms of rabies disease. It is important to know whether the animal has been captured and whether testing or observation is taking place. Testing is conducted at the ACHD lab and results are generally available in 1-2 days. Results will be provided to the bite victim who will be referred to an ED in the event that the animal is positive.

In the case of a bite to the head or neck from a wild animal, vaccine should be administered immediately without waiting for test results or observation; however, for the situations below, vaccination can be delayed:

- Bite by a dog or cat that is available for observation: the animal should be quarantined and observed. If it is not necessary to provide post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to the bite victim unless the dog or cat becomes ill and dies, which would occur within a week of the bite if it is rabid. Even if a pet is not up to date on its rabies vaccine it can still be observed and the vaccine delayed.
- Bite by a domestic animal that is sickly or unusually aggressive: it should be euthanized and tested for rabies. PEP can be delayed until the test result is available.
- Bite by a wild animal available for testing (bat, raccoon, feral cat, ground hog or other wild animal): results should be available within 1-2 days and administration of PEP can wait until test results are available.

If a person is bitten by a wild animal or exposed to a bat that is not available for testing, complete prophylaxis including HRIG and HDCV is indicated.

If rabies vaccine is administered, immune globulin should always be used for both bite and nonbite exposures. Ideally it is administered on the first day that vaccine is received. For wounds, the RIG is infiltrated around the wound and remaining volume administered IM at an anatomical site distant from vaccine administration. For nonbite exposures, the proper volume is administered IM at an anatomical site distant from vaccine administration. Vaccine should be administered on days 0, 3, 7, and 14.

Attached is a summary of our post exposure rabies vaccine protocol, and the following is a link to CDC’s webpage:

Please consult with the Infectious Disease Program at the Allegheny County Health Department for cases involving Allegheny County residents about the need for vaccine at 412-578-8062 during business hours or 412-687-2243 during evenings and weekends.

Sincerely,

Karen Hacker, MD, MPH