



Post-Bulletin

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MARCH 29-30, 2008

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\$1.75

INSIDE STYLE



Au pair care

Some parents want a more worldly influence with child care. **F1**

LOCAL NEWS

Watch your mailbox

Olmsted County sent out notices of value to property owners in cities and townships on Friday. **A4**

Meat on ice

Food shelves like the one operated by Channel One have been asked to stop distributing donated venison for the time being. **A3**

FACTOID

Money laundering

American currency paper is composed of 25 percent linen and 75 percent cotton. The linen is why it survives the washer and dryer.

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CORRECTIONS

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RECREATION / GOLF

Courses make aggressive approach shot

Clubs will battle economy, gas prices for a decent season

By Heather J. Carlson
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Eager to lure golfers this season despite a lagging economy and high gas prices, some area golf clubs are getting creative.

The Oaks Country Club in Hayfield has been advertising on local radio stations a deal aimed at getting golfers from nearby cities to drive a little farther. Anyone who pays to golf 18 holes will get a \$5 coupon towards gas.

"One thing I've heard from a lot of people that come from Rochester and Austin and Owatonna is they say, 'You know, we'd come back more often but it's the gas. It's the drive.' That's why we're going to try and cater to these people," said club professional Ryan Kuster.

Area golf courses are bracing for what might be a challenging season given the economy. Minnesota Golf Association president Tom Ryan said there was a boom in golf course construction in the 1990s. But in recent years, growth has slowed dramatically, and for the first time nationally in 2006, there was a drop in the number of golf courses. Minnesota has 508 golf courses, and that means lots of competition for golfers.

"Frankly, I think we are going to see a lot more of the clubs trying to find creative ways to attract people. They are going to do anything they can to distinguish themselves," Ryan said.

Adding to the challenge is that Minnesota's golf season, already short, is getting a late start thanks to the chilly weather. Last year, many golf courses were open in mid-March, Ryan said.

The Oaks Country Club saw a \$25,000 drop in revenue last year in memberships, green fees and golf cart rental, said club president Tim Schultz. So the club is aggressively going after new members, offering a 30 percent discount on two-year memberships.

When it comes to marketing, the Valley High Golf Club in Houston has been playing up its affordable rates and proximity to La Crosse, Wis., said Bob Isbell, the club's general manager. He said his club is closer than three of the five 18-hole golf courses near the city.



Michele Jokinen, mjokinen@postbulletin.com

Oaks Golf Course pro Ryan Kuster is looking forward to a time when there's less white on the greens. The course, near Hayfield, was open in mid-March last year and hopes to open on April 5 this year, but Kuster said that date seems pretty optimistic.

"I've been promoting that if you are worried about gas prices, we're only 20 minutes from downtown La Crosse," Isbell said.

The message is getting through. At a recent golf show in La Crosse, Isbell said, he sold a record number of memberships.

Some golf courses are turning to their clubhouses to boost revenue. At Stewartville's Riverview Greens Golf Course, the clubhouse has become a critical piece of the business, said co-owner Dan Himmer. The large clubhouse is able to house receptions, corporate events and fundraisers. With many courses reducing greens fees to draw in golfers at the same

time that operating costs are going up, Himmer said, these clubhouse facilities are becoming even more important.

"If (golf clubs) are strictly relying on members, the memberships have dropped; there is no question of that," he said. "It's a matter of what can you afford — groceries and gas or golf?"

The added competition will likely mean good deals for golfers.

"I think people are still going to be willing to spend at least a little extra money to be outside in the summer. At least, that's what I'm hoping," Kuster said.

HEALTH / PROGRESSIVE INFLAMMATORY NEUROPATHY

Futures forever changed

Some with illness might never work again, says one victim

By Jeff Hansel
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The unique nature of a new neurological illness discovered in Austin has eclipsed stories of the individuals affected.

The workers at Quality Pork Processors in Austin diagnosed so far with progressive inflammatory neuropathy live in this community, and their children go to school locally.

Yet their stories have melted into the background of what has become a national investigation.

"I just want people to know that some of these people are, in my mind, severely injured from this. They may or may not be able to work again. And if they do work, it's going to have to be whatever light-duty type of job," said a person with PIN who declined to be identified.

Documents from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say people from early adulthood to near-retirement have been affected.

Feeling the impact

Several interviewed by the Post-Bulletin moved in arthritic-like manners, taking deliberate steps with strain evident on their faces. Some grimaced from the energy needed to stand.

"I got to the point where my son would put my walker in front of me, and he'd hold down on the walker so I could use that to pull myself out of the chair," said Susan Kruse, the only victim to go public so far.

Most continue to work — some, despite seemingly insurmountable physical limitations, said health and industry officials.

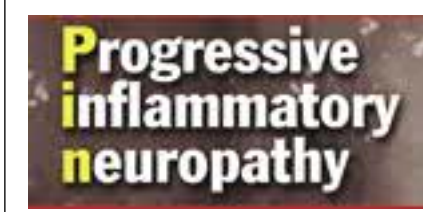
Although steroid and other treatments have helped, the term "recovered" can't be used because they continue to experience the effects of spine and nerve inflammation.

All affected, investigators said, were exposed to a "head table," the spot inside the processing plants



Nathan Howard/nhoward@postbulletin.com

Oncology/treatment nurse Lilly Sorenson inserts a needle into the arm of Susan Kruse, who receives intravenous treatment at the Austin Medical Center for a neurological illness acquired while working at Quality Pork Processors in Austin.



Inside

- Illness puts spotlight on Austin, **B6**.
- Austin woman goes public to raise awareness of illness, **B6**.
- Investigation unfolds, **B7**.

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where meat is carved off the back of hog heads for use in cold cuts and hot dogs, and where products like brains, snouts and ears get harvested.

Several people diagnosed locally with PIN said their symptoms were so severe that they awoke unable to move; had to use wheelchairs; or lost sensation in their arms, legs, feet or hands. Others had loss of feeling, tingling, pain and numbness in their lower extremities.

Seventeen people — men and women of several races — were sickened nationwide at three slaughterhouses: QPP, Indiana Packers Corp in Delphi, Ind.; and the Hormel plant in Fremont, Neb.

Exact cause unannounced

Many victims suffered severe, recurrent headaches.

"These ... headaches started coming on. It turned into being like a heavy migraine-type of feeling — a heavy compressed feeling," said an unidentified man who wanted to avoid affecting his job. A cause has yet to be announced, but investigators point at exposure to brain or nerve tissue. Like many, the man nursed his illness a few days and went back to work, but symptoms suddenly returned.

Now, all involved, including those with confirmed PIN, hope to learn a definitive cause. While they wait, most continue the daily trek to the head table — where brains no longer are harvested.

"Some of these people have got families," one person with PIN said. "They need some assistance somehow, whether it's a little extra money to help with groceries or to pay bills."

PHOTO REPRINTS

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TODAY'S PUNCHLINE

The rest of you will have to fend for yourselves.
Joke on A2

WEATHER

Sunday:
A bit of snow and rain.
45° | 25°
More: 8B

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Rochester, Minn.
Vol. 83, No. 77
66 pages

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Progressive inflammatory neuropathy

Mystery illness puts spotlight on Austin

Health professionals excited to witness brand-new illness

By Jeff Hansel
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In the southeast Minnesota community of Austin, which has about 23,000 people, a mysterious illness has been caught in the act.

It's a rare event in medicine, or the field of public health, to witness the unfolding of a brand-new ailment.

For some of the 17 people nationwide who by early March had confirmed cases of progressive inflammatory neuropathy, or PIN, the illness has been devastating.

But the story unfolding in Austin; Delphi, Ind.; and Fremont, Neb., also is exciting for investigators, from a purely scientific standpoint.

"This is an unprecedented event — not locally, but I think nationally — when you discover a new group of symptoms among a group of people," said Margene Gunderson, director of the Mower County Public Health Nursing Service in Austin.

"This has certainly been a brand-new experience for me and my nursing staff at Quality Pork," said Carole Bower, Quality Pork Processors' occupational-health manager.

Compassion for sickened workers underlies every aspect of the investigation.

"We've got to figure this out so we can keep people healthy," Gunderson said. "It is truly science at work, this whole process."

Those involved — epidemiologists and other specialists — know they've got to work fast, with an eye for sorting the relevant from the extraneous. Yet they must take the time necessary to get things right. Epidemiology, the study of epidemics and characteristics of disease, is an exacting science.

Researchers study a population at risk, collect data, and use complex techniques to analyze what the data means, says the Web site of the British Medical Journal.

Investigators recognized that people who became ill in Austin had something in common; all worked at or near a table where pig heads were harvested with high-pressure air.

Cause and effect?

But scientists kept in mind that the mere presence of something in the room doesn't mean it caused the illness.

Workers exposed to brain tissue, for example, also probably had in common exposure to blood, cleaning chemicals and, yes, even their coworkers.

Did the illnesses come from breathing in someone's cough? Scrubbing with a new chemical? A microscopic organism from pigs' blood? Or, was it indeed caused by exposure to brain tissue?

Ruling out such potential confounders became part of the investigation.

Soon after the illness was made public at a Dec. 3 news conference, exposure to aerosolized brain matter appeared to be the only commonality among everyone who became sick. The problem appears to be



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Progressive inflammatory neuropathy, a condition first identified in workers at Quality Pork Processors in Austin, has researchers looking for answers. About 118,610 people nationwide worked as slaughterers and meatpackers in 2006, according to the most recent numbers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

inhaling particles of brain, which cause an immune system reaction.

Not convinced, yet

Still, not everyone is convinced that's why PIN developed.

"I'm not at the point where I'm convinced that it's splattered brain that's causing it," said Dr. Richard Schindler, who was the medical director at Austin Medical Center — Mayo Health System when the illness first came to light.

The chief executive of QPP, Kelly Wadding, said he's not convinced yet either.

"There's a lot of scenarios that can still come into play with this," he said.

Adding to the evidence were illnesses found at plants in Indiana and Nebraska.

Those two plants also used the pressurized brain-removal process. And, despite a nationwide review of workers at other slaughterhouses, no sick workers have been found at plants that did not use the high-pressure technique.

It's hard to detect a new outbreak, even of something as simple as seasonal influenza, Gunderson said, much less a brand-new illness. She compared the discovery of HIV/AIDS to the discovery of PIN, because HIV had a worldwide impact.

The discovery of PIN in this small community has similar potential in the meatpacking industry worldwide, she said.

"This, of course, is unprecedented because it is something completely new that is occurring in our community," Gunderson said.

Plenty of praise to go around

By Jeff Hansel
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The investigation of neurological illnesses at Quality Pork Processors in Austin isn't done yet.

But there's no shortage of praise for those involved. Everyone from local to national officials are heaping praise on their investigative colleagues for unraveling a mystery that might never have been found if it weren't for Minnesotans on the front lines of health care and public health.

Here are some of the comments:

"They've pretty much broken ground as far as our review or study goes, so we're fortunate to have their expertise to rely on."

— **Marla Augustine**, spokeswoman for Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services

"From an honor and integrity standpoint, I think it was wonderful what the plant in Austin (QPP) did," by coming forward with the problem.

— **Gary Jacobson**, president and CEO of Indiana Packers Corporation in Delphi, Ind.

"I have to say that QPP was very concerned about their workers. They wanted to make things as safe as possible for them, and they wanted to institute some additional preventive measures."

— **Dr. Ruth Lynfield**, state epidemiologist with the Minnesota Department of Health

"QPP really, I think, responded rapidly, and the Minnesota Department of Health responded rapidly and said, 'We need to shut down harvesting brains.'"

— **Dr. Tim Johnson**, Austin Medical Center's CEO

"I cannot say enough about the Health Department. They were fantastic to work with. They're sincere people. They came in with the attitude of let's do what it takes."

— **Kelly Wadding**, Quality Pork Processors' CEO

"They took input from everybody, and their only goal was to find out the cause — part of the success of how this thing played out."

— **Kelly Wadding**, QPP

Kruse goes public to raise awareness about illness

By Jeff Hansel
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Susan Kruse didn't set out to become famous. But a year after she began having symptoms, officials announced a cluster of neurological illnesses at Quality Pork Processors, the Austin slaughterhouse where she had worked.

That December day, officials from the Minnesota Department of Health, Mower County Public Health and Quality Pork Processors said 11 people had unexplained neurological symptoms.

Kruse was one of them.

She immediately wanted to alert anyone else who might have symptoms, which included muscle pain and weakness so bad she no longer could stand for long periods and needed the support of a walker.

"I want it out there so everybody knows about it, so they don't suffer like I am."

— Susan Kruse

and needed the support of a walker.

"I want it out there so everybody knows about it, so they don't suffer like I am," Kruse said during a recent interview as she sat on her living room couch.

The unmistakable odor of



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Technologists, from left, Sherry Moyer and Brett Lehnertz perform an electrical test of nerves and muscles on Susan Kruse of Austin this month at Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

hogs arriving at QPP permeates her neighborhood.

"Every time I go to the clinic to have my IVIG treatments, I go right past the plant," she said. The IVIG — intravenous immunoglobulin — treatments help her body's immune system.

When Kruse used to work at QPP, brain matter would collect on workers at the "head table" where she worked. That's back when pig brains still were harvested for canning. The process was halted when health officials

realized a connection between workers' symptoms and their proximity to the procedure.

The brain matter would splatter, sometimes getting into workers' noses or eyes.

Health officials now believe aerosolized brain matter might have caused workers' immune systems to attack their own bodies.

Kruse, who worked at QPP for 15 years, got sick before anybody knew about progressive inflammatory neuropathy, as the illness now is called.

She hopes investigators will find its cause.

"You want to get to the bottom of it to find out where it's coming from. But you don't want to have something in your blood that ain't supposed to be there," Kruse said.

Almost all of the other sickened workers have declined to speak publicly because many still work at the plant and need their good-paying jobs. But Kruse has spoken on their behalf from the beginning.

WORKERS' SYMPTOMS

People with progressive inflammatory neuropathy have experienced various symptoms, including:

- Acute paralysis, back pain, burning pain, difficulty getting out of chairs, facial twitches, fatigue or exhaustion, feet that feel like lead, fevers, flu-like feelings, general achiness, inability or difficulty climbing stairs, lack of coordination, leg pain, night shivers, numbness or loss of feeling, pin-prick skin sensations, recurrent headaches, sensitivity to cold temperature, sore arms, sore throat, sudden headaches, tingling, trouble standing for long periods, vomiting, weak legs or lower-extremity weakness.

Sources: Official statements and several affected individuals

"I'm just out there to, hopefully, save somebody else's life from being as miserable as mine," she said.

Unsettling notoriety

Kruse was even featured on a CNN program.

"I've never been nobody of any importance to anybody, and all of a sudden I'm on the TVs and everything like that," she said. That's been a little unsettling.

As a result, she's gotten calls from across the country. Mostly, though, they came from news organizations like CNN.

"It was kind of different seeing yourself on something that's that big," Kruse said.

Her car became too difficult to get out of, so she got a truck that's higher off the ground.

In the early days, some were skeptical of her illness. She'd feel so bad after working a long day that she'd go to urgent-care doctors.

"They thought it was anxiety," Kruse said.

She's feeling a little better

these days, although treatments continue.

Thanks from Indiana

Gary Jacobson, chief executive officer of Indiana Packers Corporation in Delphi, Ind., said he's thankful Kruse spoke out because her story lent a face to the illness and helped raise awareness. The Minnesota investigation, he said, likely saved many people at his plant from getting sick or from staying sick longer.

When Kruse stood from the couch, her face showed strain.

"It's my legs. I've got to help push myself up, because I don't have enough strength in my legs," she said.

When the CNN piece wound to a close, the journalist looked in the camera and wished Kruse well by name.

"For them to go out of their way to say something like that, I thought that was kind of neat," she said.

Progressive inflammatory neuropathy

Rare medical investigation unfolds

Similarities in patients too much to ignore

By Jeff Hansel
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A good medical interpreter is virtually invisible as she enables a conversation between a patient and a medical provider.

But even as the words quickly passed through her, something stuck in the mind of Carol Hidalgo, a Spanish Language interpreter liaison at Austin Medical Center.

"Around in September I started having different patients, with different doctors, and I started hearing that I was interpreting the same things," Hidalgo said.

The stories of two patients were too similar to ignore.

"I thought, wow, didn't I just interpret this the other day?" Hidalgo said.

She asked a nurse practitioner and doctor who treated the patients to consult with each other, and they listened to her.

Later, when a third patient came in for a return visit, Hidalgo noticed "a drastic change" in the person's well-being and realized that this patient, too, was describing the same list of symptoms.

By this time, Hidalgo knew something wasn't right. She also knew, because patients had told their doctors through her, that all of the ill people worked at Quality Pork Processors.

"I started noticing, too, that they were all (working) in the same area," she said.

Hidalgo suggested all three of the patients' health providers meet, and they did.

"I noted a pattern, and the providers worked together and compared notes — and proved it," Hidalgo said. They and Hidalgo shared their findings with Dr. Richard Schindler, who was then Austin Medical Center's chair of general medicine and head of infection control.

"I had that afternoon off, so I just took the time and went through the charts the practitioners had given me," Schindler said.

He wondered if workers were reacting to a vaccination, had an infectious illness or had been exposed to neurotoxic chemicals.

"They were all getting progressive muscle weakness to the point where they couldn't walk," said Schindler, 66. "Growing up in the polio days, that brought back some recollections of friends going through that all of a sudden. They couldn't walk, a couple were dead."

A separate recognition

By late summer, nurses at Quality Pork Processors also were wondering what was going on. So by the time Hidalgo triggered a call to the plant, the company's manager of occupational health, Carole Bower, had workers in mind, each of whom was struggling with symptoms.

Bower connected with Schindler and family physician Dr. Tim Johnson, Austin Medical Center's chief executive officer.

"Together, they recommended that we reach out — first it was to Mayo Clinic — and then we needed to do something more investigative," Bower said.

That partnership eventually included QPP, Austin Medical Center, Mayo Clinic, the Minnesota Department of Health, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We began by being as open and having as rapid a response as we could, just because of our concern for our workers," said Bower, a registered nurse.

Alerting state investigators

Schindler shot an e-mail to every Mayo neurologist who had seen one of the patients, mentioning a neuropathy "of indeterminate cause" that appeared common to all six.

"There are several disturbing facts involved: All work at Quality Pork Processors in Austin. All work in the kill. None are exposed to chemicals. At least 3 work with brain or spinal cord of pigs. Ages range from 21 to 46. Four are Hispanic, 2 are white. Two women, 4 men. Time of onset ranges from Nov. 06 (2006) to 3 weeks ago," he wrote in September.

A short time later, he received a response from neurologist Dr. Daniel Lachance at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, who believed he'd seen an additional patient with similar unexplained symptoms.

Already that day, Schindler knew of six certain cases; a seventh was pending, and an eighth was possible.

Schindler recently returned from Haiti, where he had worked with patients newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. HIV was an illness that spread for a long time before it was recognized, and the same could have happened in the meatpacking industry with Progressive inflammatory neuropathy, he said.

"If Carol (Hidalgo) hadn't been so open, it could have gone a long time," Schindler said.

Patterned after classic study

Investigators have begun comparing the PIN investigation to the 1800s-era work of John



A panel of speakers including Dr. Ruth Lynfield, Minnesota's state epidemiologist; Kelly Wadding, president and chief executive officer of Quality Pork Processors; and Heidi Kassenborg, of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, address the media in December regarding 11 cases of neurological illness in workers at QPP in Austin.

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Snow in England, which is considered classic epidemiology.

Snow reviewed the location of deaths during a cholera epidemic. He recognized that many people who died had lived near the Broadstreet water pump in London, says a description from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Snow got the pump handle removed, and cholera deaths ceased.

"Snow's studies and the removal of the pump handle became a model for modern epidemiology," says a 2004 CDC report.

Scientists who investigated the modern-day PIN illnesses believe their colleagues, too, "removed the pump handle" when they stopped the use of pressurized air to harvest brain at QPP. And the two other affected plants nationwide — Indiana Packers Corp. in Delphi, Ind., and the Hormel plant in Fremont, Neb., — did the same.

"When we initially heard about it, the most recent case had presented some months prior, and I guess our fear was we might not figure out what was going on and there might be some ongoing risk to people working there," said Dr. Ruth Lynfield, state epidemiologist with the Minnesota Department of Health. "But I have to say that it feels like we did take the pump handle off the pump, so to speak. We have not had any new cases who developed new symptoms since the procedure was stopped."

Collaboration required

Johnson, Austin Medical Center's CEO, contacted the state Health Department directly to make sure officials there understood the gravity of the situation.

"They needed to realize we were talking about a much more significant set of symptoms," he said. "Once they realized, they responded very rapidly."

There, investigators realized they were dealing with something new.

"Here was a cluster of people presenting over the course of a year," Lynfield said. "They had similar clinical findings, and it was not like anything we had investigated in the past; something new, in terms of their presentation, in terms of the length of time that they presented over, and in terms of the types of exposures they had. These were all new features."

What could the cause actually be, Johnson still wonders.

"It's a big mystery. I don't know. Is there something different in the pigs? Is there something different in the patients? Is there some other mystery that we haven't identified yet? I don't know," he said.

When the illness was first discovered, Johnson said, "I think a big concern was, how big was this going to be? So, in other words, how many patients were going to get sick?" Investigators also worried about anxiety and the effect it could have on the community.

The discovery might eventually help "solve other mysteries," Johnson said.

48 hours to action

Within 48 hours of the initial contact with the Minnesota Department of Health, a state epidemiological investigation began.

Health officials soon believed PIN might be coming from the body's response to exposure to inhaled brain matter.

Humans produce antibodies against invaders, in this case pork brain or neural tissue. But those same antibodies affected the workers' own neural tissue, too.

Schindler worried at first "that we were unfolding something that might be infectious, concerned that it might shut down the plant, that we were seeing the tip of the iceberg, that it was something like HIV — something infective."

But researchers now believe that exposure to the "head table" where pork brain was harvested triggered the ill workers' immune systems to self-attack.

Hidalgo, the medical center interpreter, said her focus was "how do we help these people."

She didn't realize at the time the scope of the problem.

"I never honestly thought this would be something brand new. It never crossed my mind, 'Oh, a brand new disease.' I honestly just hope everybody gets better," she said. "It would be great and amazing if this gave us insight into other illnesses."

Company reacts

The PIN illnesses developed over a long period of time, he said, which meant it was hard to recognize, said QPP Chief Executive Officer Kelly Wadding, a former meat-plant worker himself. At QPP, About 1,325 employees process 19,000 hogs per day.

"All of a sudden, you wonder, what in the hell's going on? And, what can we do to stop this?" Wadding said.

Bower had employees' trust before the illnesses, Wadding said, which helped. Employee well-being was foremost during the investigation, he said.

"We took some steps, and maybe we got lucky and found the cause right that day, and stopped the brain harvesting," Wadding said. Company officials say they met with all employees weekly.

Stopping the brain harvesting took a small revenue stream away, Wadding said. But that didn't matter.

"It's hard to look a slaughterer in the eyes and say people are getting sick, more may get sick — and I don't know what's causing it. That's a hell of a situation to be in, and I tell you I'm proud of our employees," Wadding said.

No workers refused to go back to work, he said.

Why harvest brains?

"Down in the South they have 'pork and brains,' Rose Pork Brain with Gravy. They're edible," Wadding said.

The good news, he said, is the lack of new PIN cases for the past few months. A pig brain sample was sent to New York's Columbia University for analysis.

"It was stressful in the beginning, because of dealing with the unknown," Wadding said.

About 100 to 140 plant workers were interviewed, including 40 to 50 in the immediate area of the head table and another 40 to 50 outside the area.

"I don't think they're in the position to state that yeah, this is what happened," Wadding said.

Helping workers from other states

Gary Jacobson, president and chief operating officer of Indiana Packers Corporation in Delphi, Ind., said his plant closed its brain harvesting operations when hearing of the disease, and blood samples were taken from workers.

Three people at the Indiana plant had confirmed cases of PIN by early March, Jacobson said, meaning that the illness had national implications.

Indiana Packers used compressed air to harvest brains for 10 to 15 years, Jacobson said. The process was discontinued immediately once a connection with illness was found.

The old method, Jacobson said, used a device to split the skull open. The new method was believed safe for workers, and it avoided bone chips in the product.

"Why now? Why all of a sudden? Because this has been in use for many years," Jacobson said, echoing the question many are still asking. "I hear all kinds of hypotheses and theories; people feeding pigs something, some allergy developing."



"My job is always to be suspicious of false assumptions and specious conclusions."

— Dr. Daniel Lachance

Hormel Foods spokeswoman Julie Craven confirmed that a former employee from the Hormel plant in Fremont also has a confirmed case of PIN. Thus, all three plants using pressurized air to harvest brains have at least one case.

"We voluntarily stopped saving brains at both of our locations as the investigation progressed," Craven said. "We have been very open and proactive in sharing information with our employees. Their health and safety is our main concern."

Seeking more information

Lachance, the Mayo neurologist, said he's willing to look at a wider scope of patients than the epidemiologists, who focus on specific criteria rather than illness in general, including a wider geographic area and stretching back farther in time.

"I'm willing to see all who believe they have been affected and then try to sort it out," he said.

Every patient with confirmed PIN, he said, had symptoms that began before December 2007.

It's beginning to look like it's a chronic disease, Lachance said. Treatments include steroids and intravenous immunoglobulin, which are typical for neurological problems caused by certain forms of inflammation.

"We have not explored other options — yet," Lachance said.

Lachance thought a real, common theme was present when he first learned about the illnesses. Yet he's uncertain of proposed causes.

"My job is always to be suspicious of false assumptions and specious conclusions," Lachance said.

The illness is complicated, and it's a difficult one for a doctor, even a neurologist, to understand, he said.

Studying never-described illnesses is rare. "Here at Mayo Clinic, I guess we have more of an opportunity than most," Lachance said. "Most doctors don't get such a rare opportunity in their career, so it is exciting when you get to be involved in a project like this."

Specialists from throughout Mayo met early on via teleconference with the Minnesota Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The goal: no more cases.

Epidemiology

The investigation eventually reached the CDC.

"By the time we heard about it I think Minnesota had a pretty good idea about what may be happening," said Dr. Jennifer McQuiston, a veterinary epidemiologist with the agency, who thought the air technique was unusual. "My interest was raised because I didn't realize that was a technology that might be in use anywhere."

She expressed surprise that it was hard to find out how many slaughterhouses are in operation nationwide.

"We now know there are more than 500 slaughterhouses in the country that slaughter pigs to some degree," McQuiston said.

Yet the disease process remains uncertain, she said.

"It may be months or years before the laboratory results are really available to clue us in. I hope we do eventually find out," McQuiston said.

"This is a difficult kind of outbreak, and was very complex and continues to be very complex. That's the nature of public health. We want to prevent and control disease," State Epidemiologist Lynfield said separately. "That's what gets us up in the morning."



"By the time we heard about it I think Minnesota had a pretty good idea about what may be happening."

— Dr. Jennifer McQuiston, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

For more information about PIN, go to Postbulletin.com.