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Alaska ranks highest in new national data on tuberculosis rates

Techniques to prevent the spread and eliminate tuberculosis mirror COVID-19 efforts

March 25, 2021 ANCHORAGE — Alaska has retained the highest rate in the nation for tuberculosis, 7.9 cases per 100,000 persons, according to the annual national data released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Division of Tuberculosis Elimination. Tuberculosis (TB), much like COVID-19, is a highly contagious, airborne disease.

“Once the number one cause of death in Alaska, TB rates have been lowered through contact tracing, medical treatment and isolation,” noted Medical Epidemiologist Dr. Michelle Rothoff. “But work remains to be done to eliminate this preventable, curable disease.” World TB Day, aimed at raising awareness about the disease, was also this week on Wednesday, March 24.

From the 1930’s through the 1950’s, tuberculosis killed thousands of Alaskans with Alaska Native peoples especially hard hit by the disease. Like COVID-19, health workers at that time made groundbreaking progress when they realized the importance of detecting cases and preventing further transmission. Many Alaskans are newly aware of case investigations and contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these are trusted public health tools that have long been used to prevent further spread of many contagious diseases.

“It is much better to prevent contagious, infectious diseases from getting a stronghold in a population than to have to treat and eliminate,” added Dr. Rothoff. High current TB rates in southwest and northern AK are still due in part to the lingering effects of high historic rates. The goal to fully eliminate TB is also challenged by people living in close quarters.

Today, testing and prevention are still the highest priorities to limit the spread of TB, which can be cured through readily available medication. Alaska’s experience with TB demonstrates the importance of containing diseases, like COVID-19, to limit the disease’s historic lingering.

The full report issued by the CDC can be found online at:

www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7012a1.htm?s_cid=mm7012a1_w.

More information about TB efforts in Alaska, including a video of the history of combatting TB, can be found on the DHSS website at dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Epi/id/Pages/tb.aspx.

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