

Anthrax Threat: Impact on Home Delivery Pharmacy

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Background Information

- ◆ Merck-Medco serves several federal plans including FEP, GEHA, APWU, SAMBA, and AFS
- ◆ We fill 75 million prescriptions annually, with more than one million packages shipped weekly
- ◆ Two of our pharmacies: Las Vegas, NV and Willingboro, NJ combined dispense more than 1 million prescriptions weekly
- ◆ Incoming mail to Merck-Medco is generally 1st class
- ◆ Outbound packages are considered “irregular shaped parcels” by the USPS
- ◆ We dispense to domestic locations as well as overseas through APO, FPO, and State Department diplomatic pouch
- ◆ Anthrax issue arose in early October, 2001 and closure on going forward strategy by USPS has not been achieved



Merck-Medco's Inbound Mail SOPs

- ◆ Established procedures, using CDC guidelines, for personnel handling inbound mail
- ◆ Equipment and workspace cleaning procedures implemented
- ◆ Most inbound prescriptions dispensed through our two large automated pharmacies are not received at those locations
- ◆ Most mail is received at non-dispensing pharmacies and transmitted electronically to dispensing pharmacies
- ◆ Procedures were established for pharmacy personnel to report suspicious substances in mail

Irradiation of Quarantined Mail

- ◆ Drug manufacturers have not performed the long-term stability tests to ensure that irradiated products would remain safe and effective
- ◆ Mail from two regional post offices was quarantined. Those post offices are in Trenton and Brentwood
- ◆ 90 trailers of mail from Brentwood were sent to Lima, Ohio and 9 from Trenton to Bridgeport, NJ to be irradiated. First class mail and "flats" have been irradiated and released
- ◆ Merck-Medco sent a letter to the USPS requesting that any irradiated mail from Merck-Medco be returned to us to be destroyed. The USPS verbally agreed to our request but did not provide a written response
- ◆ The USPS told Merck-Medco that irradiated mail will not be marked as irradiated

Irradiation of Quarantined Mail (con't)

- ◆ The USPS has told us that while it will attempt to return all packages to us, it cannot provide 100% assurance that all packages will be identified and returned
- ◆ Beginning March 9th original quarantined packages will be irradiated in Bridgeport, NJ
- ◆ Merck-Medco will use its New Jersey pharmacy to receive all irradiated packages returned by the USPS. Those drugs will be destroyed following EPA guidelines
- ◆ 19 packages impacting 26 prescriptions have been returned to us, during testing in Bridgeport -- with visible evidence of impact from irradiation

Replacement Strategy for Quarantined Shipments

- ◆ We identified the zip codes served by the two affected post offices. We then identified all prescriptions that could have been in those post offices at the time the quarantine was imposed
- ◆ For each of the pharmacies in our system we identified the class of mail and type of shipment that may have been used to send the potentially impacted prescriptions
- ◆ We created a safety zone on the front-end of the quarantine date to be conservative
- ◆ Our analysis determined that 3,200 members of various plans (both FEHBP and others) had prescription orders that may have been held in the quarantine
- ◆ We identified each member affected and provided a copy of that list to the USPS

Irradiation of Quarantined Mail (con't)

- ◆ Using the list of the 3,200 potentially affected members of health plans we serve, we initiated outbound calls to members
- ◆ The scripts for the calls vary depending on whether the patient had previously contacted us during the quarantine period and requested a replacement
- ◆ The calls were well received. Some members were confused about the USPS irradiation procedures. Some members asked that we just send them a replacement order.
- ◆ Based on our phone contacts, we generally replaced any affected order that had not previously been replaced
- ◆ All replacements of the quarantined packages were sent by UPS, not USPS. The use of UPS for the affected members will continue for any new orders for some time period, as yet to be determined

Will mail be irradiated prospectively?

- ◆ The USPS is irradiating letters and flats going to the 202-205 zip codes from anonymous sources (e.g., stamped mail or local collection boxes)
- ◆ The USPS has not determined whether it will be irradiating any other mail of any type on a going forward basis. The USPS has purchased additional equipment, but none has been deployed
- ◆ The USPS wants to focus on detection, not irradiation.
- ◆ At least preliminarily USPS has decided that if irradiation is implemented it would only be used for letters, flats, and any stamped mail. Mail from “known mailers” such as Merck-Medco will not be subject to irradiation

Issues Unique to Overseas Shipments

- ◆ Merck-Medco's packages are sent to APOs, FPOs, and to the State Department for diplomatic pouches
- ◆ APO/FPO shipments were not affected
- ◆ Direct shipment of drugs to overseas addresses via postal service or common carrier is usually restricted by recipient country
- ◆ Even though USPS and the State Department attempted to clarify that packages included in diplomatic pouches had not been irradiated, the communications were not comforting to plan members
- ◆ "There is no guarantee items will escape irradiation 100% of the time. Mistakes do occur."
- ◆ To remedy, Merck-Medco is sending all mail to 202-205 zip codes via common carrier, not USPS
- ◆ Same protocol remains in place until further notice

Lessons Learned -- Looking Forward

- ◆ Development of state specific strategies for drug distribution
- ◆ Role of CDC and state health departments in responding to future threats
- ◆ Need for entire pharmaceutical distribution chain to evaluate how to manage future threats
- ◆ Managing member expectations and comfort level is critical to OPM's mission and that of FEHB plans