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Health Crisis In Panama As Many Die From Contaminated Government Medicines

by LADB Staff

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The mysterious deaths of 42 people in Panama became a full-blown health crisis when it was discovered that government-made cough and anti-allergy syrups caused the illnesses and subsequent deaths. Health Minister Camilo Alleyne said that the syrups were made in a government lab operated by the Caja de Seguro Social (CSS) and were mixed with diethylene glycol, an alcohol used as an industrial coolant and in glue to keep it moist.

Patients began dying around midsummer, the cause unknown until US health officials discovered the link to the medications when the death toll stood at 21 in mid-October. "It was really a mystery illness that had everybody stumped," said Scott Dowell of the global disease protection program at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Panamanian authorities called in the CDC after a dozen people had died with symptoms that included kidney failure, paralysis, sagging facial muscles, and other problems.

The US investigators found the diethylene glycol in four cough-syrup bottles flown from Panama City to the CDC in Atlanta, Georgia. The toxicity of the chemical has been known to US health authorities since 1937, when 105 people died in the US from a medication made with the stuff. That case precipitated congressional action resulting in the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) being empowered to certify the safety of drugs before they could be legally sold.

The CDC has dealt with this chemical internationally in the past. In 1996 more than 30 children in Haiti were hospitalized with sudden kidney failure, and the CDC found the substance in acetaminophen syrup made in Haiti. The center now has 200 full-time employees in 45 countries, an expansion from just 87 in 38 countries in 2000. They are trying to position themselves for rapid response to unusual disease outbreaks throughout the world. A response center was established in Guatemala in 2006.

On discovering the cause of the illnesses, Panamanian police immediately suspected tampering and announced an investigation of everyone at the CSS lab. "It will be necessary to take statements from those people involved in handling this substance," said senior prosecutor Rigoberto Gonzalez. In other measures, the government removed the products, antihistamines as well as cough syrup, antihistamine pills, calamine lotion, and rash ointment containing the contaminated base from clinics and put out warnings for people not to use them.

Thousands of workers and students took to the streets to collect the products wherever they could be found. They combed neighborhoods and stores. They also tried to convince people who had ingested the stuff to get medically examined. About 3,750 bottles were found by late October, but about 20,000 bottles have yet to be recovered, mostly from poor people who use the government

health services. Panama provides free health care for all Panamanians, of whom 40% are poor. People of means, and the large expatriate community, most of whom are from the US, are far less likely to use the system or its medicines.

Health-promotion director Mayanin Rodriguez told the media, "We have recruited people to make a sweep, even going house to house, in areas where we have information that people may have gotten prescriptions." In all, the government recalled 24 types of medication produced by the health system. They also suspended production at all government pharmaceutical factories.

"We are facing a crisis," said David Abrego, a clinic director. "The people are apprehensive. There's a lot of tension and nervousness." Hundreds of people had turned up at his clinic for evaluation. Abrego said the cough medicine is used extensively. "It's what we take for any kind of problem in Panama, the flu, a change in climate that makes you feel bad." In fact, he went on, he, his wife, and two daughters all took it recently. They all submitted to blood tests to ascertain that they had suffered no damage.

Across the country, the government set up 34 clinics to perform blood tests for kidney damage and identify the sick. The clinics, opened Oct. 18 on a 24-hour basis, had tested 50,000 people by Oct. 27, but most of these were in urban areas. Most worrisome were people in rural areas, where information about the products had not penetrated. Investigators from the CDC were sent to search for new cases in these remote places.

By the second week in November, the number of people tested had grown to an estimated 64,300. While health authorities hunted for victims of the contamination, law-enforcement agents sought the provenance of the product. They suspected an expired batch of glycerin and a Panamanian supplier who had changed the expiration date from 2004 to 2007. Deputy Attorney General Luis Martinez said investigators were working on the theory that a chemical reaction caused by the old glycerin produced diethylene glycol.

Authorities detained three people, including a lawyer who created the shell company that was blamed for changing the dates. But the company had no known address, and police did not know the name of the owner. Panama is awash in these companies, ghost firms used mainly to launder cocaine profits from neighboring Colombia.

Media reports said that the CSS purchased the glycerin from the Panamanian company Medicom S.A. Medicom got it from the Spanish company Rasfer International, which got it from Fortune Way Company of China. Fortune Way got it from the manufacturer, Taixing Glycerine Factory, also a Chinese company. Investigation of the applicable law determined that Medicom was responsible for certifying the suitability of the product and that state agencies were responsible for determining that the products were as certified.

At the end of this long trail of providers and verifying agencies, the Caja de Seguro Social is prohibited from receiving any product not so verified and certified, and it is the responsibility of the CSS to verify that the string of verifications and certifications from original manufacturer to their doorstep have been done. Torrijos where the buck stops It appears that none of this was done,

in violation of an equally long string of laws and regulations, and that President Martin Torrijos is bearing the blame because he campaigned on promises to improve the health care system and to end corruption and incompetence.

Ex-President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) took Torrijos to task for washing his hands of the corruption that, he said, underlay the events and for not exercising his powers to fire the corrupt and sanction the inept. Endara called a news conference to make his charges, all of which further inflamed an already agitated populace. He said, "A Dantesque tragedy and cruel poisonings, not detected in time, had to occur for President Torrijos to come before us today with the truism that if his resignation could bring back the dead, he would already have resigned."

Torrijos had promised changes to the health system days before Endara's onslaught. On Nov. 13, the president announced the changes. He said that the CSS laboratory that made the products would be closed permanently and that the entire sector would be reorganized into a single system. There were expectations that Torrijos would fire Health Minister Camilo Alleyne and CSS director Rene Luciani, but, instead, the president charged them with formulating a law to regulate the new single entity, encompassing the government system and autonomous and semiautonomous state health operations. "This new system must provide a secure, equitable, and universal service that positions the human being as its only reason to exist," he said.

Alleyne was directed to present to the Cabinet, within 90 days, a bill to create a national authority for medicines and medical technology that would guarantee the control, quality, safety, and efficacy of all medications and health care products. Alleyne must also take "immediate actions," including creating a public health defender's office appointed to the Defensoria del Pueblo. The closed CSS lab is to be replaced by the Instituto Conmemorativo Gorgas as the public health laboratory of reference.

Torrijos also announced the creation of a special presidential office to administer a compensation fund for the families and survivors of the poisonings, without requiring them to forego their legal right to sue for damages. He said that investigations would go forward and that "no one would be excused from responsibility. If in the investigations any degree of responsibility is determined for any official, of whatever rank, let there be not the slightest doubt that we will act." Torrijos is also expected to take legal action against the Chinese and Spanish companies in the procurement chain.

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