


MEMORANDUM

TO: House Committee on Health Care

FROM: Harry Chen, MD, Commissioner 

RE: Lyme Disease Report – January 2014

DATE: January 29, 2014

The number of reported cases of Lyme disease in Vermont continues to rise. In 2013, the Vermont Department of Health (VDH) followed up on 1321 reports of disease. Out of these, 670 met the case definition for a confirmed case, and 220 were determined to be probable cases. These numbers are substantially higher than the previous highest year in 2011, during which there were 476 confirmed and 147 probable cases reported to VDH. Infections continue to occur most commonly in residents of Bennington, Rutland, Windham and Windsor Counties, but illness has been reported in every county.

In 2013, VDH took the following actions to monitor Lyme disease and other tickborne diseases, educate Vermonters about the disease and address the requests from the legislature outlined in the letter to Commissioner Chen dated May 8, 2013.

1. Public outreach and education remains a key part of VDH's strategy to combat Lyme disease. The VDH website has up-to-date information about Lyme disease, other tickborne diseases, tick ecology and tick bite prevention. VDH has limited funds for education and outreach so the website is a cost-effective method for making information available.
 - a. In September, VDH launched the Vermont Tick Tracker website at <http://healthvermont.gov/ticktracker/index.aspx>. This website, paid for with CDC climate change grant funds, plays a map of Vermont for people to indicate where and when they find ticks so that others can learn where ticks have been found in Vermont. Most importantly, it provides links back to the VDH website so that people can get more information about ticks and tickborne diseases.
 - b. In the spring of 2013, VDH organized a Lyme disease prevention video contest for high school students. The winner of the contest was featured during a segment of "The 30" on WCAX. Six entries were received this first year. The video contest will be repeated in 2014.
 - c. A Lyme disease curriculum for elementary school students was developed and posted on the VDH website. Efforts to promote the curriculum are ongoing.
 - d. VDH staff gave multiple media interviews about Lyme disease and tickborne diseases to television, radio and print journalists throughout the year.



- e. For the second year in row, VDH partnered with Green Up Vermont to promote tick bite prevention on Green Up Day. VDH will work with Green Up Vermont in 2014.
 - f. VDH placed an advertisement in the *2013 Vermont Hunting, Fishing and Trapping Laws and Guide* to remind people to take precautions to prevent tick bites when they engage in these recreational activities. The ad was repeated in the 2014 edition.
 - g. In 2013, VDH staff gave 5 presentations about Lyme disease to the general public. Presentations were given in Winooski, Orwell, New Haven, St. Albans and Brattleboro. Presentations are given upon request.
 - h. Printed materials are available. These are given out by District Office staff at health fairs and other events. They are also mailed directly to interested parties when requested. VDH maintains an inventory of our "Be Tick Smart" informational booklet and our Tick Identification cards. Over 30,000 booklets and approximately 20,000 Tick ID cards have been given out since 2010. These materials can be ordered on our website.
2. and 3. Education of health care providers
- a. VDH participated in four continuing medical education sessions on tickborne diseases in 2013. Sessions occurred in April in White River Junction and in December in Rutland and were organized by the Southern Vermont AHEC and the Vermont Medical Society. Presenters included VDH staff, Infectious Disease Specialists from Fletcher Allen Health Care (FAHC) and community physicians who have treated patients for suspected chronic Lyme disease. These trainings included information on the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease. Another session is being planned for April 2014. Funding for these educational sessions was provided by the Board of Medical Practice. In addition, VDH staff and FAHC Infectious Disease Specialists presented on Lyme and other tickborne diseases at two sessions during VDH's Infectious Disease Conference in October in Burlington.
 - b. The proper testing, diagnosis and treatment of Lyme disease was discussed at all of these sessions. The benefits of early treatment and the possible need to retest people if acute tests are negative were also discussed.
 - c. VDH maintains a webpage for healthcare providers:
<http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/lyme/provider.aspx>. The webpage includes links to the most current treatment guidelines for tickborne diseases and to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) healthcare provider resource page.
 - d. VDH recently printed copies of CDC's quick reference manual for healthcare providers on tickborne diseases. This 30-page manual was provided at the most recent educational sessions.
4. All healthcare professionals are invited to attend the educational sessions that VDH participates in. It is not clear what role mental health professionals, clinical social workers and clinical mental health counselors would play in the diagnosis of Lyme disease. Therefore, these groups have not yet been targeted.
5. VDH staff track recommendations regarding best practices for diagnosis and treatment of Lyme and other tickborne diseases. Staff participate in webinars and educational sessions at conferences



whenever they are available. Staff is included on public health list serves where ticks and tickborne diseases are sometimes discussed. The website is updated when recommendations are changed. Staff routinely consults with public health officials in other northeastern states to discuss best practices. In October 2013, VDH hosted the annual Northeast Epidemiology Conference which was attended by public health personnel from the northeastern states. At this conference, there was a preliminary discussion about developing regional approaches to Lyme disease surveillance and response.

6. VDH continues to encourage providers to report diagnoses of Lyme disease and other tickborne diseases. In 2013, a record number of reports were received, so the surveillance system seems to be working fairly well. However, education and outreach about surveillance will continue. An on-line form for reporting is being developed. It is hoped that it will encourage more providers to report as well as improve the quality of the information provided.
7. VDH has provided a modest grant to a researcher at Lyndon State College to collect ticks at 10 to 12 sites in the state, six on the western side and six on the eastern side. In 2013, he collected over 300 ticks, most of them *Ixodes scapularis*, the vector for Lyme and other tickborne diseases. The grant included funding to have the ticks tested for three pathogens of concern, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, *Anaplasma phagocytophilum* and *Babesia microti*, at a research lab at the University of Massachusetts. This was provide by the Climate Change grant awarded to the Department of Health by CDC. Funding is available for 2014, and it is hoped that funding will continue to be available for additional years.

