Threat letter menace: the Fiji experience

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First Encounter

On October 17 2001, a Foreign Embassy received a letter containing white powder, sent from overseas

First investigated by their own security, later a specimen sent to CWM lab
Locally

Almost simultaneously, four letters of local origin were sent to public offices and prominent citizens.

Identical in layout, handwritten, and same point of origin.

Every thing, including the mail of that day was collected by forensic technicians, and sent to lab.
Lab response

- Emergency meeting was called by the consultant pathologist, including the medical superintendent, ICN, clinicians and support staff.
- Disaster management team was formed, and guidelines were issued to clinicians for possible exposure cases.
Lab action plan

Lab protocol was developed with specific objective of confirming the presence or absence of B. anthracis in the suspected material in line with CDC guidelines, using available resources.

Sending specimens was purposefully not considered an option.
Processing of Samples

- Class II biosafety hood was used for processing these specimen in isolated lab, with restricted entry.
- None of the specimens showed any organisms by Gram stain on day one.
Sub cultured in Trypticase Soya Broth, Blood agar, and McConkey agar

On second day plates showed no growth, re incubated

Broth showed turbidity

Gram smear showed Gram positive bacilli (GPB)
Sub cultured on secondary plates, motility agar tube

Primary plates showed no growth on day three, secondary plates grew white, dry large hemolytic colonies, Gram stain showed GPB in chains

Motility tube showed ambiguous result
Final results

Microbact™ was inoculated, which ruled out B. anthracis for all five specimens
Operations Difficulties

- Storage of hazardous material posed space problem, therefore forensic technicians were advised to collect specimen in broth, send to the lab and seal the area, pending lab report
Further encounters

Five more letters containing suspected material, all of local origin were sent to various offices and people in the next one month.

All were processed using the same protocol, and found to be negative for B. anthracis.
First major challenge

- One letter containing white powder was sent to prominent public office, sealed off after collection of specimen
- Standard protocol applied in processing
- Day one showed no organism, inoculated on standard plates and broth
Secondary plates

- GPB, non hemolytic on BA
- Non-Motile by hanging drop
- Catalase +, Oxidase –
- Microbact results:
  - Xylose, ONPG, gelatin, & arabinose + ive
Expert opinion

- Findings sent to WHO Suva office, which sent them to regional, & head office in Geneva
- Also Labs in Australia
- Advised for further investigations,
- API 20™ & API 50 CH™ put up, which was recommended by most
Results

API 20 E: ONPG, glucose, & gelatin +

API 50 CH results:
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<td>L-arabinos</td>
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Confirmation

B. megaterium,

Confirmed by WHO experts, & other consulted
Conclusions

Following the events of September 11 in USA and subsequent anthrax scare, similar tactics were used in Fiji for creating panic and confusion among the public.
Conclusions-contd

Although possibility of anthrax spores sent to any one remained a remote possibility, it succeeded in creating a sense of apprehension, scare, and heightened state of alert
Conclusions-contd

It also resulted in enormous waste in terms of work hours for the offices where these were sent, law enforcement agencies in investigations, and extra burden in lab processing, resulting in resource drains on lab facility of limited resources.
Conclusions-contd

While Anthrax scare died down in rest of the world, last week of January University registrar’s office received a suspected letter containing white powder

B. Anthracis ruled out in 3 days
Acknowledgments

- WHO offices in Suva, Manila, and Geneva
- CDC BT website, for guidelines & updates
- ICPMR, Westmead in Australia
- US Embassy in Suva
- Biomeriux Australia