



# FOCUS on Field Epidemiology

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: FORENSIC EPIDEMIOLOGY INVESTIGATIONS

*Scenario:* On October 2, 2001, the Palm Beach Health Department was notified of an unusual gram stain in a patient with meningitis. The state epidemiologist was contacted and a team of local epidemiologists began an investigation. Initial laboratory tests suggested that the case might be systemic anthrax. On October 4, the state lab confirmed *Bacillus anthracis*. The CDC was asked to verify the diagnosis, and state and federal investigators joined the local staff to conduct an intense investigation of the possible source. The patient had traveled by car from Florida to North Carolina and back to Florida during the week prior to his illness, so authorities began environmental investigations of residential, work, and outdoor activities of the patient.

1. At this stage of the investigation, what are the roles of public health officials and law enforcement authorities in the investigation? Under what circumstances might the roles of public health and law enforcement change?
  2. What is the North Carolina law on entry and sampling of homes and workplaces?
  3. What could be anticipated as media requirements/demands prior to and after laboratory confirmation?
- On October 8, anthrax was detected in environmental samples taken from the patient's workplace.
4. Do these findings change the roles of the public health and law enforcement investigators?
  5. Who is in charge of the investigation at the patient's workplace and residence?
  6. How do crime scene issues affect the public health investigation?



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