

NEWS RELEASE

June 9, 2009

MASON COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

**411 NORTH 5TH ST
SHELTON, WA 98584**

**TO: KMAS, KRXY, SHELTON-MASON COUNTY JOURNAL, THE OLYMPIAN,
SHELTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE, NORTH MASON CHAMBER OF
COMMERCE, CITY OF SHELTON, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL,
THE SUN**

RE: Cocaine Contamination Threatens Local Users

At least three individuals have reported to Seattle hospitals with a life threatening illness, likely caused by the use of cocaine contaminated with a drug used to treat animals. Called **levamisole**, the contaminant critically reduces a person's white blood cells, causing a condition known as agranulocytosis, where the affected person loses ability to fight infection. Levamisole contamination of some cocaine has previously been reported across the United States, Canada, and globally.

Patients with this condition in Seattle had life threatening infections requiring hospitalization and intensive care unit admittance. One individual needed extensive surgery, and another resulted in a hospitalization cost that exceeded \$100,000.

"Cocaine is a dangerous and addictive drug, knowing that it may be contaminated is an urgent reason to stop using it and seek opiate addiction treatment." Said Dr. Diana Yu, Health Officer for Mason County Public Health.

Levamisole is likely added to the cocaine product at the point of production outside of the United States, though it is not understood why. It can seriously reduce a person's white blood cells, suppressing immune function and the body's ability to fight off even minor infections. People who snort, smoke, or inject crack or powder cocaine contaminated by levamisole can develop overwhelming, rapidly developing, and life threatening infections.

Symptoms in persons using cocaine contaminated with levamisole include:

- High fever, chills or weakness
- Swollen glands
- Infections or sores in the mouth, skin, or anus
- White coating of the mouth, tongue or throat (thrush)
- Pneumonia, which includes cough, fever, and shortness of breath

Persons using cocaine and experiencing any of these symptoms should seek medical attention at an emergency room or other medical provider immediately.

Cocaine causes overdose and death every year in the United States. At this point, investigators are unsure whether there have been any local deaths or other significant illnesses caused by cocaine adulterated with levamisole.

For questions or more information call Mason County Public Health at 360-427-9670 ext. 274 or from Belfair 360-275-4467 ext. 274.

Tim Sheldon
Chair

Lynda Ring Erickson
Commissioner

Ross Gallagher
Commissioner