



1101 West College Avenue  
Spokane, WA 99201-2095

509.324.1500 | TEL  
509.324.1464 | TDD  
[www.SRHD.org](http://www.SRHD.org)

May 22, 2013

Representative Marcus Riccelli  
Washington State House of Representatives  
3<sup>rd</sup> Legislative District - Spokane  
John L. O'Brien Building 419  
Olympia, WA 98504

Dear Representative Riccelli:

In response to your May 20, 2013 inquiry, I am providing you information regarding Spokane Regional Health District's role in responding to letters found to contain ricin toxin in Spokane.

First, let me thank you for your continuing and ongoing work to help keep our bioterrorism (BT) laboratory funded and operational. The BT lab was a critical component as part of last week's events and proved a necessary element in protecting public health. Your support, along with those of other public partners, is critical as we continue to seek long-term solutions to maintaining the lab's presence here. Ongoing preservation of the BT lab ensures that eastern Washington and northern Idaho are adequately prepared to respond in a timely manner to public health incidents like last week's.

Specific to this recent incident, SRHD's bioterrorism lab staff received and processed the specimens for the presence or absence of ricin and other bioterrorism threat agents and determined the presence of ricin toxin. As you likely already know, ricin, a substance found in castor beans, can be a potential threat to human health when the beans are processed into purified material, such as a powder or pellet. If inhaled, ingested or injected, this material can be highly poisonous. There is no antidote or treatment, resulting in death to those directly exposed to significant amounts.

Due to the nature of ricin, testing is a two-step process. First, a certified laboratory response network (LRN) laboratory gives preliminary results. SRHD's BT lab is a certified LRN lab and acted in this capacity last week in testing of materials. Initial results are then usually confirmed at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lab. Of note, our bioterrorism lab can do confirmatory testing for other select BT agents such as anthrax, plague and tularemia.

Our BT lab staff are certified to then package and ship potentially biohazardous materials, as was the case last week, for further testing—procedures that are highly-regulated and require specific training.



1101 West College Avenue  
Spokane, WA 99201-2095

509.324.1500 | TEL  
509.324.1464 | TDD  
[www.SRHD.org](http://www.SRHD.org)

If our BT lab had not been operational, preliminary specimen testing would have occurred at the Washington State Department of Health laboratory in Shoreline, Wash, about 10 miles north of Seattle. Proper packaging and shipping practices by trained and certified personnel would still be needed prior to shipping. The sample material most likely would have been driven to the Shoreline lab by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington State Patrol, or perhaps by someone in the U.S. Postal Service, at their discretion. The length of time to testing could be as long as eight to 10 hours, based on time to transport and the availability of trained lab personnel at the Shoreline facility.

Also, if SRHD's BT lab had been non-operational, it is unclear whether critical, local public health staff would have been notified of this event. The response of local public health is critical when responding to bioterrorism events. In the case of the ricin letters, based on what was known about the agent and what was seen in the lab, an SRHD epidemiologist was able to contact all the individuals who handled the envelopes to assess their individual risk. The actions of our staff may have prevented unnecessary concern and needless visits to the emergency room.

Additionally, it was important for our staff to quickly ascertain that there was no risk to public health identified at the original site, averting any unsubstantiated fears. An eight to 10 hour delay in the identification process of a bioterrorism agent would have made it very challenging to manage the concerns of those potentially exposed and those partners responding to the threat.

In closing, I hope this letter provides a concise description of SRHD's role in the event and adds clarity concerning the very real need to keep this bioterrorism lab in eastern Washington functional and proficient. We're happy to provide further details at your request. Again, thank you for your continued efforts and shared dedication to ensuring the health and safety of our residents.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joel McCullough". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joel McCullough, MD, MPH, MS  
Public Health Director and Health Officer  
Spokane Regional Health District  
1101 W. College Avenue, Room 330  
Spokane, WA 99201-2095  
509-324-1501 phone  
509-324-1507 fax  
[jmccullough@srhd.org](mailto:jmccullough@srhd.org)  
[www.srhd.org](http://www.srhd.org)