

Anthrax blamed as two postal workers die in United States

Fred Charatan *Florida*

Two US postal workers who handled mail at an office where a letter contaminated with anthrax was sorted are suspected to have died from the disease. As the *BMJ* went to press this week, tests were being carried out on the men who died in what officials called "highly suspicious circumstances."

The cases, if confirmed, would bring the number of deaths to three since the first case in Florida more than two weeks ago. The men worked in Washington's main sorting office, where investigators believe three letters con-

taining anthrax were sorted.

Tom Ridge, former governor of Pennsylvania and the Bush administration's new domestic security chief, told a press conference at the White House on Monday that 2000 postal workers there were being tested for exposure to anthrax and were being treated with antibiotics. Extensive environmental testing was also being conducted. Similar precautions were being taken to protect workers at a second sorting facility in Maryland.

Tommy Thompson, secretary of health and human services,

has announced that he is negotiating with Bayer and other drug companies to buy ciprofloxacin and other antibiotics that could be used to treat anthrax.

Meantime, worried Americans are flocking to buy ciprofloxacin from drugstores in Mexico. Farmacias del Rio in Ciudad Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas, sells a pack of 36 generic ciprofloxacin tablets for \$55 (£37). The same amount of the drug in the United States would cost \$170 to \$180.

The Food and Drug Administration has ordered all private

ciprofloxacin shipments arriving from overseas to be stopped at the border, a move to crack down on illegal antibiotic sales on the internet spurred by the anthrax scare. The FDA is also investigating reports that internet sites are selling fake Cipro (the market name for ciprofloxacin) instead of the real drug.

Robert Mueller 3rd, director of the FBI, said that the US government would offer a \$1m reward for information leading to the conviction of anyone responsible for anthrax attacks. □

Caesarean section rate in England and Wales hits 21%

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

More than 1 in 5 births in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland are now delivered by caesarean section.

A national audit of the caesarean section rate, based on a snapshot of births in maternity units during a three month period, has shown that the overall rate for England and Wales is now 21.5%. That compares with a rate in England of 4% some 30 years ago.

The national sentinel caesarean section audit, carried out by the clinical effectiveness support unit of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, also shows wide regional differences.

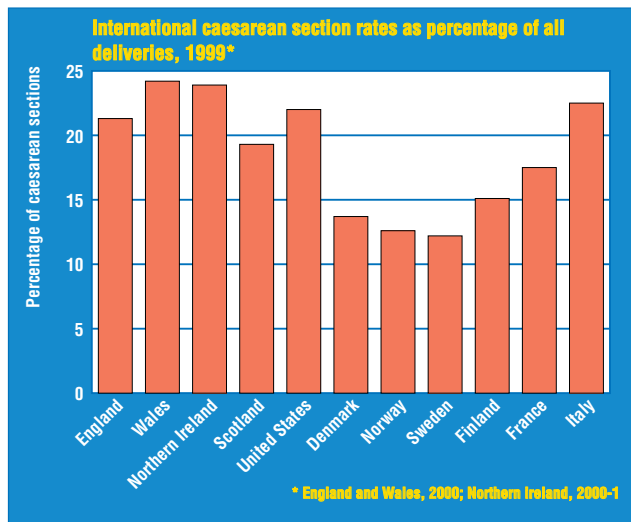
Caesarean section rates were highest in Wales (24.2%) and lowest in the north east of England (19.3%) and the south west of England (19.4%). The rate for Northern Ireland was 23.9%. There were regional differences too within the units.

The report said that for maternity units with an annual

delivery rate of more than 1000 babies there should be at least 40 hours of consultant time dedicated to the labour ward. But it says that this was achieved in only 16% of units in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. A regional breakdown shows a wide variation, ranging from Wales having no units meeting the criterion, to the West Midlands with 29.4%.

The audit said that there have been public health concerns for 30 years about the increasing caesarean section rate. It pointed out that the greatest increase in the rate in England was in the 1970s, when it doubled from 4% in 1970 to 9% by the end of the decade. By 1995, the rate was estimated to be 16%, and in 1999 to be 19%. The report noted that in Scotland the rate increased from 5% in 1970 to 20% in 1999.

As well as providing what it described as the most comprehensive set of data collected on caesarean section rates, the



report also gave insight into current views of consultants.

As part of the exercise, 162 consultants from 40 units responded to a questionnaire. "Many consultants regard a CSR [caesarean section rate] of 20% as being too high," said the report. "All but two consultants said that they believed there was a shift in obstetric culture towards a lower threshold for performing CS [caesarean sections]."

The report also said, "Fifty one per cent thought that their

unit rate was too high. The median CSR in units where these consultants were based was 23.1%. Twenty one per cent of consultants reported that a high CSR did not concern them."

Factors associated with caesarean section rates included demographic changes, women's choices about childbirth, and the views of obstetricians. □

The *National Sentinel Caesarean Section Audit Report* is accessible at www.rcog.org.uk