



HPU/Region
Our ref:
Date: 06 March 2009
To: General Practitioners

Dear Colleagues,

BOTULISM IN INJECTING DRUG USERS

Please draw this information to the attention of all relevant members of the practice staff.

In the week between 22/02/09 and 02/03/09, five heroin injecting drug users (IDUs) (four males and one female) have been reported to the Health Protection Agency Centre for Infections (HPA CfI), from London, East of England and the South East with clinically diagnosed wound botulism. All were injecting drug users who are in the habit of injecting sub-cutaneously ("skin popping"). These cases raise the possibility that a batch of heroin is contaminated with the anaerobic bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. Wound botulism in injecting drug users is now the most common presentation of botulism seen in the UK today.

The symptoms of botulism are so dramatic that sufferers are likely to present straight to hospital, but should anyone consult you with any of the symptoms please send them to hospital for assessment as a medical emergency. These symptoms are caused by the effects of botulinum toxin at the neuro-muscular junction and include:

- Difficulty swallowing
- Blurred or double vision
- Slurred speech
- Shortness of breath
- Descending muscle weakness and paralysis

There may be a skin abscess indicating the route of entry of the organism.

Botulism does not spread person-to-person, so other members of the household can be given complete reassurance on that point.

Local drug services are advising users on how best to protect themselves.

Contact the HPU on the number above if you need more information on this subject.

Yours sincerely