Fighting dengue fever

BY JOHN SEVIGNY
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Health officials on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border are mounting an attack against a dime-sized insect that carries a potentially fatal disease. Dr. Bernardo Ramirez Mante, chief of the state health department in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, said he has seen almost 60 patients with symptoms of dengue fever in the past three weeks - a disease carried by mosquitoes. Most of the patients came from sprawling neighborhoods on the city's west side, Ramirez said.

"Right now, we are worried but we are trying to contain it to those areas," he said. Other health professionals, meanwhile, think the outbreak is far more severe and widespread than Ramirez estimates. Jose Antu, a doctor at a federal clinic in Nuevo Laredo that provides health care for workers, said he and his colleagues have treated almost 1,000 people with dengue symptoms since January.

Last weekend alone, doctors at the clinic saw 40 such cases, he said. (See *FIGHTING Page 22A) "The official reports are not reliable but the medical community is kind of concerned about what's going on," Antu said in reference to the state health department statistics.

Dengue is carried by only one kind of mosquito, Aedes aegyptai, and the only way to catch the disease is to be bitten by an infected bug. In its most severe form, the disease causes internal bleeding, fever, weakness, shock and intense pain. It can also kill, but deaths from dengue are rare, although elderly people are more at risk than others, health officials said.

There is no cure, but typically, dengue disappears after causing a few weeks of pain and misery. "It's extremely painful but ordinarily it's a self-limiting infection that goes away eventually," said Bruce Eldridge, a mosquito expert at the University of California at Davis.

Because it takes a blood test to determine whether patients actually have the disease - a test which can take months - Nuevo Laredo officials do not know how many people have dengue. So far, five people have tested positive in Nuevo Laredo, Ramirez said. But the initial reports from Mexico have officials on both sides of the Rio Grande declaring all-out war on the mosquito in an effort to stop the spread of the disease.

In Laredo, city workers take to the streets from 3 to 6 a.m. six days a week, fogging neighborhoods with insecticide in an effort to rid the city of the bug. That effort has coincided with a public awareness campaign that has almost 20 city inspectors going door-to-door urging residents to remove tires, tin cans and old buckets that might hold standing water from their yards.

Mosquitoes need standing water to breed. A few cases of dengue pop up every year in Nuevo Laredo, said Jerry Robinson, director of the city of Laredo Health Department.

The problem is worse this year because recent, unseasonable rains have created a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes. So far, there have been no reported dengue cases here, Robinson said, but the disease could appear here at any time.

"The odds are probably a lot better than winning the Texas lottery or any other game of chance in Las
Vegas," he said. Officials in Nuevo Laredo, meanwhile, have spent every day for the past two weeks fogging more than 35 neighborhoods using machines borrowed from the city of Laredo.

They've also removed hundreds of tons of garbage from those neighborhoods, including old tires and other trash, and this week, soldiers walked the streets warning residents about the disease, Ramirez said. Ramirez expects the Nuevo Laredo outbreak to have peaked by today. It could be under control within another two weeks, he said.

Robinson disagrees. "So long as we are dealing with a plentiful supply of Aegis aegyptai mosquito that are biting people, the disease will continue," he said. Ramirez, of the Nuevo Laredo health department, conceded that there might be many more cases in his city that he has not heard about.

"The ones I know about are the ones who go to the hospital," Ramirez said. "There might be others who have symptoms but do not seek treatment."