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Lab Errors Responsible for Some False-Positive Multidrug-Resistant TB Cases During Outbreaks

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Since 1990, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has investigated multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) outbreaks in which some of the patients were thought to have falsely positive MDR *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb) cultures. Of 223 patients reported to have MDR Mtb isolates, a record review found evidence that 62 (28%) did not have MDR-TB. These reports came from at least 16 hospitals and laboratories in five states. Fifty-eight had a clinical course inconsistent with TB, with many smear and culture negative specimens but only one culture positive for MDR-TB, and showed clinical improvement with no antituberculosis treatment. The other four contaminated specimens came from patients with drug susceptible TB; three patients each had one MDR isolate reported among multiple susceptible specimens and the fourth was a child reported with MDR-TB but whose only exposure was to a relative with susceptible TB.

Laboratory procedure review suggested that contamination occurred both during primary isolation and when susceptibilities were done. Most of the 62 contaminated specimens were processed by Bactec shortly after highly smear-positive MDR isolates from patients who had multiple positive specimens. These data suggest that contamination of isolates in TB laboratories may be common and that healthcare providers should consider the clinical course of the patient when evaluating the results of mycobacterial cultures and susceptibility testing. Laboratories should avoid contamination and should periodically evaluate their procedures to determine if contamination may be occurring.

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