TB patient is son-in-law of a CDC microbiologist

Reasons for travel, other details emerge

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ATLANTA -- A globe-trotting Atlanta lawyer with a dangerous strain of tuberculosis was allowed back into the U.S. by a border inspector who disregarded a computer warning to stop him and don protective gear, officials said Thursday.

The inspector has been removed from border duty.

The unidentified inspector explained that he was no doctor but that the infected man seemed perfectly healthy and that he thought the warning was merely "discretionary," officials briefed on the case said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because the matter is still under investigation.

The patient was identified as Andrew Speaker, a 31-year-old personal injury lawyer who returned last week from his wedding and honeymoon trip through Italy, the Greek isles and other spots in Europe. His new father-in-law, Robert Cooksey, is a CDC microbiologist whose specialty is TB and other bacteria.

Cooksey would not comment on whether he reported his son-in-law to federal health authorities. Nor did the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention explain how the case came to their attention.

However, Cooksey said that neither he nor his CDC laboratory was the source of his son-in-law's TB.

Speaker is now under quarantine at a hospital in Denver. He is the first infected person to be quarantined by the U.S. government since 1963.

The disclosure that the patient is a lawyer -- and specifically a personal injury lawyer -- outraged many people on the Internet and elsewhere. Some travelers who flew on the same planes with Speaker angrily accused him of selfishly putting hundreds of people's lives in danger.

"It's still very scary," 21-year-old Laney Wiggins, one of more than two dozen University of South Carolina-Aiken students who are getting skin tests for TB. "That is an outrageous number of people that he was very reckless with their health. It's not fair. It's selfish."

Speaker said in a newspaper interview that he knew he had TB when he flew from Atlanta to Europe in mid-May for his wedding and honeymoon, but that he did not find out until he was in Rome that it was an extensively drug-resistant strain considered especially dangerous.

Despite warnings from federal health officials not to board another long flight, he flew home for treatment, fearing he wouldn't survive if
he didn't reach the U.S., he said. He said he tried to sneak home by way of Canada instead of flying directly into the U.S.

He was quarantined May 25, a day after he was allowed to pass through the border crossing at Champlain, N.Y., along the Canadian border.

The inspector ran Speaker's passport through a computer, and a warning -- including instructions to hold the traveler, don a protective mask in dealing with him, and telephone health authorities -- popped up, officials said. About a minute later, Speaker was instead cleared to continue on his journey, according to officials familiar with the records.

The Homeland Security Department is investigating.

The border officer "who questioned that person is at present performing administrative duties," said Homeland Security spokesman Russ Knocke.

Colleen Kelley, president of the union that represents customs and border agents, declined to comment on the specifics of the case but said "public health issues were not receiving adequate attention and training" within the agency.

On Thursday, a tan and healthy-looking Speaker was flown from Atlanta to Denver, accompanied by his wife and federal marshals, to Denver's National Jewish Medical and Research Center, where doctors planned to isolate him and treat him with oral and intravenous antibiotics.

Dr. Charles Daley, chief of the hospital's infectious-disease division, said he is optimistic Speaker can be cured because he is believed to be in the early stages of the disease.

Doctors hope also to determine where he contracted the disease, found around the world and in pockets in Russia and Asia.

Speaker's tuberculosis was discovered when he had a chest X-ray in January for a rib injury, Huitt said.

He will be kept in a special unit with a ventilation system to prevent the escape of germs. "He may not leave that room much for several weeks," hospital spokesman William Allstetter said.

Speaker's father-in-law has worked at the CDC for 32 years and is in the Division of Tuberculosis Elimination, where he works with TB and other organisms. He has co-authored papers on diabetes, TB and other infectious diseases.

"As part of my job, I am regularly tested for TB. I do not have TB, nor have I ever had TB," he said in a statement. "My son-in-law's TB did not originate from myself or the CDC's labs, which operate under the highest levels of biosecurity."
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http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/national/318109_tb01.html