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OPINION

TODAY'S EDITORIAL

TB is still not a disease of the past

April 13, 2002

Our position: *The comeback of tuberculosis is cause for a sustained U.S. health campaign.*

Since the 1940s when antibiotics were invented to cure tuberculosis, the approximate 8.8 million cases of TB and resulting 2 million deaths each year have been considered the curse of poorer, developing countries, not the United States.

But the world has gotten smaller. Experts say increased travel is increasing the airborne disease's mobility to advanced nations and its development of multiple-drug-resistant strands.

In the United States, some 16,000 cases of tuberculosis are still recorded annually. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that TB rates fell 2 percent in 2001 after several straight years of declines in the 6 percent range. About half of all new TB cases in the United States occur among foreign-born individuals.

Last year in a school in central England, the United Kingdom experienced its largest single TB outbreak in 20 years. And just last month, several Walt Disney World employees in Orlando were diagnosed with the illness.

While not directly connected, these episodes demonstrate TB's high mobility. It is most likely to spread first to gateway areas, such as New York, California, northern Virginia and the entire southern border.

Hoosiers are not immune. From 1996 to 2000, an average of 19 people died from TB each year in Indiana. Indiana reported 145 cases in 2000, 48 in Marion County.

A coalition of more than 80 public health agencies is urging Congress to double spending to fight tuberculosis to \$265 million in fiscal year 2003, for use here and abroad.

"Tuberculosis rebounds when it is neglected," warns American Lung Association President John L. Kirkwood. "The reason: a lack of political will to adequately fund and maintain effective tuberculosis control programs."

TB is called a "community disease" because one person with TB can make a million people sick. Fighting TB not only helps the global community but serves our own best interest.

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