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**Status Update on MDPH Efforts to Investigate Reports of
Neurological Vocal Tics and Other Vocal Symptoms Reported
Among Students Attending
Essex Agricultural and Technical High School and
North Shore Technical High School**

May 10, 2013

The purpose of this summary is to provide an update on activities being conducted by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Bureau of Environmental Health (MDPH/BEH) to investigate concerns regarding acquired vocal disorders such as neurological vocal tics and repetitive hiccups reported among approximately one to two dozen students who attend either Essex Agricultural and Technical High School or North Shore Technical High School, located in Danvers and Middleton, MA, respectively.

In February, 2013 MDPH met with parents of affected children, as well as with school and local health officials from Danvers and Middleton, to describe several efforts underway to further investigate the prevalence of these vocal symptoms and to learn more about the specific environmental concerns. At that meeting, MDPH described our efforts to work with the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine (BORIM) to identify medical providers in the more than 50 communities where students who attend one of these schools may live. In March, 2012 based on input regarding catchment areas from pediatric specialists at Children's Hospital as well as from feedback from parents who attended the meeting, MDPH worked with BORIM to distribute letters to over 2600 attending physicians, encompassing more than a dozen medical

specialties. The letters to physicians described the MDPH investigation and requested their assistance in identifying any patients they may treat with an acquired vocal disorder, such as vocal tics or chronic hiccups, and that attend one of the two high schools. Physicians were asked to discuss the MDPH investigation with the parent of these patients to determine their interest in participating and to provide a copy of an enclosed consent form that, with signature, allows MDPH to obtain and review their patient's medical records. In addition to the outreach to area physicians, a copy of the MDPH consent form was also provided directly to parents who attended the February meeting.

To date, MDPH has received signed medical records consent forms for nine students who have been reported as having these symptoms. MDPH is currently working with BORIM to distribute a follow-up letter to physicians and is requesting that medical records consent forms be provided to MDPH no later than May 31st. **Any parent who has a child with these symptoms that they hope will be included in the MDPH investigation should contact Meg Blanchet, Assistant Director of the MDPH/BEH Environmental Toxicology Program, at 617 624-5757 to request copies of the medical records consent form as soon as possible.**

Once MDPH receives the signed consent forms, department staff will contact the medical providers listed on each child's form to request copies of their medical records. After the medical records are received by MDPH, our BEH Medical Officer, Dr. Burstein, will begin conducting his review. As described in an earlier update, information contained in the medical records will be used to 1) determine whether the symptoms/diagnoses could possibly be related, and 2) identify any potential common factors that may have contributed to the development of vocal tics or vocal disorders among these children. Thus, it will be important for MDPH to obtain complete medical records for each child for whom consent to participate has been provided before the medical records review can be completed.

MDPH has received a few inquiries from parents who attended the February meeting requesting information on specific recommended physicians and/or whether MDPH plans to conduct interviews of the affected students. It is important to clarify that MDPH/BEH does not have a role in providing medical treatment nor can we recommend a specific medical provider for this purpose. In addition, although there was an interest expressed by some parents that the affected students would be interviewed, MDPH's step-wise investigative approach is to conduct the

review of medical records first to identify whether any common factors (environmental or non-environmental) may exist among the students. If there are potential commonalities identified, then MDPH would evaluate next steps including a determination of whether interviews would be an appropriate mechanism to gather additional information.

Concurrent with efforts to better understand the prevalence of vocal tics or other vocal disorders among students, the MDPH/BEH Indoor Air Quality Program (IAQ) has completed a number of indoor environmental assessments that involve air testing and visual observations in school buildings and property that are accessible to students. To date, investigations have been conducted in five of the 20 buildings that make up the campus at the Essex Agricultural and Technical High School and that are most frequently populated/used by high school students including the main classroom building, the cafeteria, the gymnasium, the Expo Center and the horse barn. IAQ staff are in the process of making arrangements to visit the remainder of the occupied high school buildings at Essex Agricultural and Technical High School and to visit the North Shore Technical High School by the end of May. Based on the observations and air measurements taken during the building investigations conducted at Essex Agricultural and Technical High School to date, no environmental factors that would be most likely attributed to significant neurological effects have been detected. These and other findings of the IAQ investigations will be summarized in several reports forthcoming in June or July.

In addition to the physician's outreach, medical records review, and the ongoing IAQ environmental investigations, the MDPH/BEH Community Assessment Program (CAP) is in the process of obtaining and evaluating any available environmental information for the East Street Field in Middleton where parents who attended the February meeting reported that many of the students experiencing vocal tics and chronic hiccups have played sports. CAP staff have been in contact with the Middleton Health Department and the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection to determine what information and data may be available for this field.

We hope these investigation updates are helpful. If any parent has questions or concerns, they should feel free to contact Meg Blanchet, Assistant Director of the MDPH/BEH Environmental Toxicology Program at 617 624-5757.