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BAY AREA

Business on the back
A new online game system may shake up the industry



Inside
Bay Area B2
California B3
Death notices B6
Lottery B2
ChronicleWatch B3

HEALTH CARE

A different type of TB patient

By Elizabeth Fernandez
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The rate of tuberculosis in San Francisco has been dropping over the last decade, but health officials say they are seeing a new type of TB patient, someone who isn't poor or homeless or a newly arrived immigrant.

Rather, the disease is now being found in low-risk settings that don't usually harbor

TB — at an affluent high school, a law office, bars, even at a venture capital firm.

The cases at the school and bars triggered fear and hundreds of screenings, and public health officials say it's a trend they're closely watching, particularly because San Francisco continues to have the highest rate of TB of any metro area in the country.

"We're concerned," said Dr. Masae Kawamura, director of

► In Business: Gene-based test developer Cepheid of Sunnyvale has devised a rapid, sensitive diagnostic test for tuberculosis and will make it available at reduced cost in developing countries where the life-threatening disease is widespread.

the San Francisco Department of Public Health's TB Control. "We can prevent and cure TB, but it's really not over. It's a

complex problem."

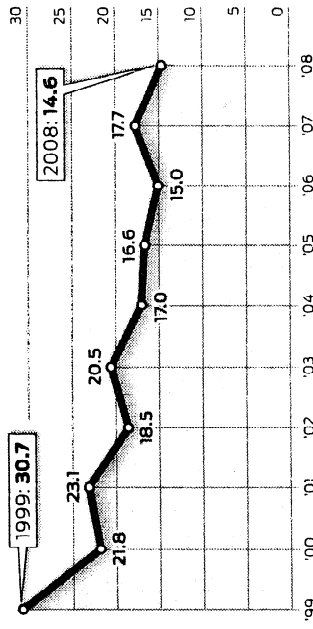
According to just-released data, California's overall tuberculosis rate has dropped to its lowest level on record. The number of cases in San Francisco has also declined, from 143 in 2007 to 118 last year. In Contra Costa County, however, the number of cases shot up 55 percent — from 51 in 2007 to 79 last year. Contra Costa, which had undergone a steady

Tuberculosis continues on B5

San Francisco tuberculosis rate

In 2008, the rate of tuberculosis cases in San Francisco had declined 17.5 percent from the previous year, and 52.4 percent from 1999.

Number of cases per 100,000 population



Source: California Department of Public Health, Tuberculosis Control Branch

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A different type of TB patient

Tuberculosis from page B1

decline in recent years, is the only jurisdiction in the Bay Area to see an increase.

The increase is due largely to latent infections becoming active, said Dr. Charles Crane, medical director of the Contra Costa Health Services' tuberculosis program. He said the statistics are a grim reminder of the ever-present danger posed by TB.

"Everybody breathes," he said. "It isn't just a disease for immigrants, it is a threat to everybody."

TB is a bacterial disease that is spread in the air from one person to another. It can attack any part of the body, but usually centers on the lungs, and generally requires extensive antibiotic treatment. Last year, nearly 13,000 cases were reported in the United States, a 4 percent dip from the previous year.

But with the deepening recession, medical experts fear the rates will reverse.

"I think we'll see later diagnoses as people lose their jobs and health insurance," said Dr. Robert Benjamin, Alameda's TB controller. "People are losing housing. Instead of having one family of five people living in one household, now there are eight or nine people or more — prime conditions for transmission."

Alameda County has experienced two TB clusters in the last few years, he said.

In San Francisco, the rate of TB has dropped nearly in half over the last decade.

But last fall, a 16-year-old student in San Francisco — the name of the high school is not being disclosed — came down with an active case. Public health officials screened 106 students and 11 faculty members who were exposed — they found that 11 students and one teacher had been infected.

"There is evidence of transmission from the student,"

Rate of tuberculosis cases

Rate listed below is the number of tuberculosis cases per 100,000 population. Reporting jurisdictions in California with the highest rates in 2008:

	2007		2008		Percent change, 2007-2008
	Cases	Rate	Cases	Rate	
San Francisco	143	17.7	118	14.6	-17.5
Madera	1	*	21	13.6	*
Santa Clara	241	13.4	197	10.9	-18.7
Imperial	29	16.6	19	10.6	-36.1
Long Beach	39	7.9	47	9.5	20.3
Alameda	149	10.5	133	9.3	-11.4
San Joaquin	51	7.4	66	9.3	25.7
San Mateo	87	11.9	64	8.7	-26.9
San Diego	280	9.0	264	8.4	-6.7
Los Angeles	815	8.4	792	8.1	-3.6
Santa Barbara	14	3.3	34	8.0	142.4
Ventura	57	6.9	65	7.8	13.0
Sacramento	110	7.8	110	7.7	-1.3
Fresno	42	4.5	73	7.7	71.1
Solano	37	8.7	33	7.6	-12.6
Contra Costa	51	4.9	79	7.5	53.1
Tulare	25	5.7	33	7.4	29.8
Orange	217	7.0	209	6.6	-5.7
Yuba	6	8.0	5	6.5	-18.8
Kern	40	4.9	51	6.1	24.5
Sutter	1	*	6	6.1	*

* Rates/rate changes not calculated where number of cases was less than 5

Source: California Department of Public Health, Tuberculosis Control Branch

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said Dr. Christine Ho, a field medical officer with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention who is stationed with San Francisco TB Control.

In December, a cluster of five cases was unexpectedly linked to bars.

"These were people who were young and active," said Kawamura.

Public health workers launched an aggressive screening campaign among a dozen bars in the Castro and South of Market neighborhoods. Altogether 237 bar employees were screened — 4 percent were positive.

For San Francisco attorney Neil Rosenbaum, 65, the cause of his TB is still a mystery,

though he suspects he might have acquired it at a Mission district elementary school where he's a tutor.

In the summer of 2007, he came down with a persistent cough. Then, classic TB symptoms: night sweats, low-grade fever, loss of appetite. After nine months of antibiotics, he is now free of the disease.

"It is not pleasant, you feel really bad," he said. "But once I got on the regimen of antibiotics, the symptoms lifted. When I had the disease, the X-rays of my lungs looked like a cloudy day in San Francisco. After the antibiotics, the X-rays look like a clear day."

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