

# Tuberculosis a hidden killer

by Crystal Nolen

The telltale signs, coughing, fatigue, and night sweats, of Tuberculosis (TB) are often mistaken for the flu, a cold, or pneumonia. At one point in history, TB was so prevalent, sanatoriums were constructed throughout the country. However, once this disease began to be understood and controlled, and the sanatoriums closed and the awareness about TB also dwindled. Now, general physicians and nurses are receiving limited training on the recognition of this disease. Also, new strands of TB, which cannot be controlled with the medication available, are spreading throughout highly populated communities. One third of all the Tuberculosis (TB) cases found in Oklahoma are found solely in Oklahoma County. Our large population, with increasing foreign-born citizens and condensed living spaces, allow for TB to become more widely spread than in the rural areas of Oklahoma. In 2004, there were 44 active cases of TB in Oklahoma County.

TB is an airborne infectious disease caused by a specific bacterium. It is spread through the air when a person with *active* TB coughs, sneezes, talks, laughs, or sings. This disease usually affects the lungs, but it can affect other parts of the body as well.

A person exposed to TB, may or may not become infected. A person with a healthy immune system may never become sick with TB, but could just have the infection. This person would simply carry the germ in his or her body. When a person with a weakened immune system has TB, the TB bacteria will grow and

may eventually cause the individual to experience symptoms. This is called active TB disease. Symptoms of TB include night sweats, persistent cough, weight loss, chest pain, loss of appetite, fatigue and weakness.

Most strands of Tuberculosis can be treated and cured with medication, but this wasn't always the case.

Consumption, as TB has been called, was widespread and deadly for centuries. The first known reference to this disease was written by Hippocrates around 460BC. Later, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, one out of seven people, living in the US or Europe, died of Tuberculosis. Although science and social conditions around the world have greatly decreased the spread of this contagious disease, TB causes more than 3 million deaths each year.

Studies have shown that there are specific populations that seem to generate more TB disease than other populations. In the U.S., one identified population is foreign-born persons. These residents may never have received medical care for TB in their native countries. Foreign borne persons account for 53.1 % of the TB in the U.S.

Populations born within the U.S. can also be prone to TB. These populations, having nothing to do with race, are at greater risk for disease due to other medical conditions or lifestyle factors. For instance, diabetics, people with cancer, and HIV positive individuals are at risk of contracting this disease because of

their compromised immune systems. Individuals who have substance abuse problems are also at a greater risk of TB infection.

Lastly, children under the age of 5 years are another high-risk population because of their decreased ability to fight infection. In 2004, TB disease in this age group increased by 31.8% in Oklahoma County. As children are unlikely to spread the disease to other children, these numbers indicate that there is TB in the communities in which the children can contract the disease from caretakers and older family members.

The only way to stop TB is to become aware. If you believe you may have symptoms of TB, see your doctor or call your local health department. Also, if you believe that you are in a high-risk category (*HIV positive, Foreign-Borne, Diabetic, Native American, or Substance Abuser*) and may have been exposed to TB in your lifetime, please contact your physician for a simple TB skin test. The earlier TB is diagnosed, the less transmission of disease will occur.