

## Follow Rubio's lead on Valley Fever funding

By The Bakersfield Californian

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Kudos to state Sen. Michael Rubio for stepping forward and pledging to do something about the rise in Valley Fever cases we've seen in recent years. Rubio, D-Shafter, is planning to craft legislation to help fund the stalled search for a vaccine. He will also hold a town hall on Valley Fever in Bakersfield next week to collect information.

Hopefully, Rubio is just one of several local leaders prepared to step forward and champion the cause by pumping in more attention and funding. An ongoing series by reporters from The Californian and the Reporting on Health collaborative has revealed that cases of the deadly fungal infection are increasing drastically. Along with the rise in infection rates, suffering and deaths, costs are rising, too. And we are all paying for that.

There has never been a more pressing need to find ways to prevent and better treat the deadly fungal infection. Yet, funding for a vaccine has dried up and no new monies have appeared on the horizon. A fresh infusion of funding is desperately needed. Rubio's constituents have no greater health need than this, a fact the state senator must make clear to fellow lawmakers.

Coccidioidomycosis, as it's also known, is costing us plenty. Valley Fever hospitalizations are on average more expensive than any of California's 24 most common conditions requiring hospitalization. And taxpayers, through Medicare, Medicaid and other government programs, have covered about 60 percent of those hospitalization costs in the last 10 years, to the tune of about \$2 billion. There are other costs, too, like the \$8 million the city of Bakersfield has paid since 2000 in workers' compensation claims for employees who contracted Valley Fever on the job. State prisons spend \$23 million each year to treat inmates with the infection. And of course, individuals and their families also face staggering hospital bills and a loss of income from missed work or outright job loss.

As badly as we need a vaccine, we also need more research into treating Valley Fever infections and education on detecting it. Federal research dollars in general are low for Valley Fever compared to diseases that have less overall impact, such as West Nile virus, which impacts far fewer people but has a much higher national profile. Given this widespread lack of understanding, Rep. Kevin McCarthy ought to step up and advocate for increased funding for Valley Fever research on a national level. Better treatments and earlier detection of Valley Fever will help drive down costs, much of which is borne by taxpayers.

There also needs to be leadership in the local medical community. Too often, Valley Fever goes undiagnosed or is misdiagnosed by doctors. This can lead to unnecessary worsening of the infection and costly treatments for the wrong illness. In the worst cases, it can result in preventable death, such as in the case of a 12-year-old Oildale boy who died in January 2011 after his Valley Fever was misdiagnosed as viral meningitis.

We hope more local leaders will join Rubio in advocating for more attention for valley fever. Investing in prevention and better treatment is a proven way to lower costs. Until now, Valley Fever has been unattractive to the major pharmaceutical companies because of the localized area where it occurs. That might be the ethos guiding big pharma, but it's no excuse for our government to abandon the effort.