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Guest Column: We aren't insulated from Lyme's dangers

By Kathleen Liporace

Phil Wood was an energetic South Carolinian before contracting Lyme disease while employed as a timber buyer. His duties included cruising tracts of land on foot to assess the value of timber for purchasing. As a timber buyer, Wood faced a risk largely unknown in South Carolina -- Lyme disease, an affliction that can be caused by the bite of a tick.

As is typical for advanced cases of Lyme borreliosis, or Lyme disease, Wood suffered multiple unremitting physical issues. The symptoms included swelling; confusion; tingling and numbness of the hands; migraines; headaches; dizziness; muscle, joint and chest pain; ringing of the ears; nausea; fever; and unrelenting fatigue. He also had to have his gallbladder removed, which is common for Lyme sufferers.

Because he contracted this disease while working, Wood's health insurer left him without coverage, and told him his case should be covered by workers' compensation. Wood filed for workers' comp late in 2004 and again the following spring, when he requested a workers' compensation hearing. The Workers' Compensation Commission ruled in his favor, ruling that his tick bites "occurred while he was working" and later confirming that "there is substantial evidence that ... the organism that causes Lyme disease is present in South Carolina."

While most people do not contract Lyme disease at work, Wood's case is typical of many chronic Lyme patients, whose illnesses are hard to diagnose, difficult to treat and often not believed.

This decision holds promise for those in South Carolina who suffer from chronic Lyme disease. It attests to the authenticity of Lyme, and it underscores the necessity of long-term treatment for chronic Lyme disease. That's important because many insurers now limit treatment to 30 days, resulting in extensive out-of-pocket costs for the continued, long-term treatment of this multi-systemic condition.

The contested 2006 Infectious Diseases Society of America Lyme treatment guidelines state that there is no Lyme below the Mason-Dixon Line. However, the CDC disagrees with that. The guidelines advocate treatment of one month's duration or less and do not meaningfully address chronic Lyme. In 2006, South Carolina had 52 confirmed and probable cases reported to state health authorities. This number is also statistically low, because the CDC notes that Lyme disease is underreported by tenfold. Further, these statistics do not account for those who suffer with chronic debilitating symptoms and have continued active infection. There is no reporting in place for these individuals.

This is a disease that can be difficult to recognize. The CDC Lyme Disease case report form states, "Lyme Disease is a systemic, tick-borne disease with protean manifestations, including dermatologic, rheumatologic, neurologic and cardiac abnormalities." Many people are misdiagnosed with syndromes and diseases that Lyme deftly imitates. The bacteria that causes Lyme has 132 genes, a chromosome and 21 plasmids. This is a sophisticated bacteria.

During the reporting years of 2005-2006, Lyme was reported in all but three South Carolina counties. This makes it a concern for everyone in our state, as many who contract it in our

state will likely be undiagnosed. Although the numbers seem low in contrast to Northeastern states that have much higher numbers, this is no disease to trifle with.

Prevention is a must for anyone in South Carolina, as people here have been bitten in their own yards. Use caution when going outdoors. Wear long, light-colored clothing with pants tucked into socks and don a long-sleeved shirt. This admittedly is not a fashion statement many care to make, but in combination with applying DEET to clothing, it mitigates the risk of being bitten. Perform tick checks when returning home from wooded and grassy areas. Ticks can be as small as the period at the end of this sentence. Don't lean against trees or wander into tall grass!

If one is diagnosed quickly, the disease can be cured in its early stage. The probability of a full recovery drops significantly if the disease goes undiagnosed and untreated. Lyme can be as debilitating as congestive heart failure. Fatalities have occurred as a direct result of Lyme and associated tick-borne infections. Take care when engaging in any outdoor activity.
