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TITLE: California has highest incidence of TB in US

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POSTED: 11 Aug 2013 7:16 PM

URL: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/california-has-highest/772568.html>

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CALIFORNIA: Tuberculosis (TB) is treatable and curable, yet it remains one of the biggest killers in the world today.

What few people know is the slow-growing bacteria may lie dormant in the body for years.

California has the highest incidence of TB in the US, particularly in Silicon Valley.

Experts say foreign workers import the disease from places like India, China and Southeast Asia.

President and CEO of "Breathe California in the Bay area", Margo Sidner, said: "It's such a big problem because of our diversity. We have people from all different countries who emigrate here.

"People who come from countries where they couldn't get treatment do not understand that TB can be cured. And some of them also don't have a custom of taking drugs. So they worry about taking the year-long therapy that's necessary to control TB."

To test for latent TB, a small amount of a common antigen is injected under the skin. If the immune system reacts within around 48 hours, it's a sign the patient has been exposed to tuberculosis.

TB controllers say treatment is a preventative measure, but patients are not always keen.

Santa Clara County TB controller, Teeb Al-Samarrai, said: "I think one of the challenges we face is oftentimes when people feel well, they don't want to be treated. So it takes a bit of convincing them that they should be treated to stop TB from developing as a disease later on."

Another hurdle to overcome is a national shortage of a key TB medicine: Isoniazid.

Isoniazid is a cheap drug that has been used since the 1950s but recently the federal government has not had enough to go round.

TB controllers want Congress to increase research funding for drug-resistant TB, which has previously been cut. And that's not their only concern.

At the moment, holders of the H1B work visa do not have to be screened for infectious diseases.

Immigration reform could lead to a rapid increase in foreign worker population in the US, and TB controllers say that without a screening programme, TB rates could rocket too.

- CNA/ir