

Vaccines offered for uninsured surfers

Often-tainted offered prompts health efforts

By **Emily Vizzo**

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Signs frequently posted in Imperial Beach warning of contaminated water off the coast don't always keep surfers at bay, particularly when a tempting winter swell sweeps in.

That's why a team of researchers, environmental activists and health professionals have partnered to organize "Sick from the Surf," an initiative providing 1,200 free Hepatitis A vaccines to uninsured Imperial Beach water-goers, including swimmers and seashore fishermen.

The Imperial Beach Health Center partnered with Wildcoast, an Imperial Beach nonprofit environmental organization, and San Diego State University's Graduate School of Public Health to secure a \$195,000 grant. Money comes from the Community Clinics Initiative, a program established by the San Francisco-based Tides Foundation and the California Endowment, a private health foundation.

"Basically, it came out of knowing that people were getting sick in the water here," said Wildcoast representative Ben McCue. "We know that despite the warning signs, people are going to go in the water. They should still try to protect their health as much as they can."

During rainstorms, northbound ocean currents can funnel contaminated water from the Tijuana River into Imperial Beach waters, said Rick Gersberg, an environmental health professor at SDSU's Graduate School of Public Health.

Gersberg spent two years monitoring bacteria levels at the mouth of the Tijuana River and at the Imperial Beach pier, finding a prevalence of Hepatitis A and other viruses from sewage.

This affects two of Imperial Beach's best breaks, McCue said: Boca Rio, at Seacoast Drive, and Tijuana Sloughs, a legendary cobblestone reef break near the river mouth.

Recently, volunteers gathered at Seacoast Drive, dispensing coffee, doughnuts and Sick from the Surf cards that the uninsured can redeem for vaccines at the Imperial Beach Health Center, 949 Palm Ave., McCue said.

The clinic is asking patients to complete surveys designed to help document illness related to water contamination, said Nancy O'Sullivan, the health center's program development coordinator. Corraling data about people getting sick from contaminated ocean water can be a murky undertaking, because symptoms such as diarrhea, skin irritation and fever are tough to attribute.

In 2007, Wildcoast workers surveyed 130 ocean users, documenting that two-thirds of those polled who entered the ocean at least once a week throughout the year reported getting sick afterward, McCue said.

"We're trying to collect data on the connection between beach water quality in Imperial Beach and the environmental health of the community," McCue said. "That direct connection is really hard to make."

Retired high school teacher Jim Knox has been surfing in Imperial Beach – and sometimes getting sick – since 1962, he said. Knox's three surfer sons, all in their 20s, have been vaccinated.

"Everybody should get them," Knox said of the shots. "You should get as much protection as you can."

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