OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH ‘WEIL’s DISEASE – September 2014
(Leptospirosis)

Introduction
Vennsys has like all companies a duty of care to protect its employees from occupational diseases, one such disease that we may encounter as a result of the work we carry out is Weil’s disease.

However, what is Weil’s disease and what do we need to do to minimise the risk of coming into contact with the disease and potentially being infected.

This Toolbox talk, the associated card and GP letter will hopefully provide you the information and tools to understand the risk, implement the controls and therefore maintain your health and safety.

What is Weil’s?
Weil’s disease is the acute human form of a bacterial infection with a raft of different names including: mud fever, swamp fever, haemorrhagic jaundice, swineherd’s disease, sewerman's flu. However all are known by the medical term Leptospirosis, mild cases of which affect millions of people every year worldwide.

After an incubation period that can vary from three days to three weeks, most patients suffer severe headaches, red eyes, muscle pains, fatigue, nausea and a temperature of 39C or above, in roughly a third of these cases there is a skin rash; sometimes hallucinations.

In very severe cases, symptoms include haemorrhaging from the mouth, eyes and internally. There is significant and rapid organ damage: liver and kidney failure can occur within 10 days, leading to jaundice (these are the only cases that can properly be called Weil's disease). Hospitalisation, followed by antibiotics and often dialysis, will be required if the patient is to survive.

Recovery can take months. Only a very few patients experience the severe, life-threatening illness known as Weil's disease, thought to kill two or three people a year in Britain.

Route of Entry
People contract the infection through contaminated fluids, tissues, or waters.

The infection enters through any breaks in the skin (e.g. abrasions, cuts), mucous membranes (e.g. eyes) and possibly intact skin.

Cause
The most common cause of the spread of this infection is through contact with animal urine either from direct contact or indirect by exposure to infected animal tissue, land, water (including recreational reservoirs) and any surface or product that could have been exposed to direct contact.

It is not just rats; approximately 75% of UK cattle have been exposed to Leptospira hardjo, which means that after infection they harbour the bacteria in their kidneys for months, even years, excreting many leptospires in their urine so acting as a reservoir of infection for other cattle and people.

There are also dogs, in particular those who regularly go swimming in lakes, rivers and streams, which again then go on to transmit leptospires in their urine.
Prevention
To significantly reduce the risk of contracting this infection the individual when working in potential risk areas is to maintain high levels of personal hygiene. Ensuring that hands are properly washed before eating, smoking or rubbing eyes etc.

All open wounds or any breaks in the skin should be covered by a waterproof dressing whilst working in a potential risk area.

Personal protective clothing may also be required e.g. gloves are to be worn at all times when lifting water meter lids and/or excavating for meter fits etc. Eye protection is to be worn if dirty/contaminated water is present in the excavation/chamber, waterproof clothing may also be required dependant on the on site risk assessment.

Health Surveillance
There is no recommended medical screening for this condition.

Each individual with the potential to be at risk will be issued with a green card containing details of the condition, who is at risk, what the symptoms are, and what they should do should they be concerned they may have contracted the condition.

If an individual believes they may have contracted the condition they should seek medical advice immediately explaining their potential exposure to Weil’s disease.

If it is confirmed by a doctor that an employee has contracted this condition it is reportable under RIDDOR.

Fitness for Work
There are few medical conditions that should prevent individuals from this type of work; the following are conditions that will require careful consideration and assessment by the Vennsys occupational health management provider if identified.

- Individuals with recurrent or long term skin disorders that predispose to infection. If areas of broken skin cannot be suitably covered with a waterproof dressing then the individual may need to avoid work with excavations/chambers due to the potential for dirty/contaminated water until the condition has been brought under control by medical treatment.

- Individuals who are at a greater risk from infection, for example individuals undergoing chemotherapy treatment or suffering from a disease causing immunosuppression, such as leukaemia.

No job is so important that you can’t take the time to do it safely – Take 5 to make sure you keep yourself safe. Don’t put your hands in harm’s way!

If you have any concerns and/or questions regarding the content of this tool box talk you can contact the SHEQ Team at the following email address; VennsysSHEQTeam@vennsys.co.uk