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First case of highly drug-resistant TB found in US

LANTANA (Florida): It started with a cough, a hack that refused to go away.

Then came the fevers. They bathed and chilled the skinny frame of Oswaldo Juarez, a 19-year-old Peruvian visiting to study English. His lungs clattered, his chest tightened and he ached with every gasp. During a wheezing fit at 4am, Juarez felt a warm knot rise from his throat. He ran to the bathroom sink and spewed a mouthful of blood.

"I'm dying, he told himself, "because when you cough blood, it's something really bad."

It was really bad, and not just for him.

Doctors say Juarez's incessant hack was a sign of what they have both dreaded and expected for

years — this country's first case of a contagious, aggressive, especially drug-resistant form of tuberculosis. The Associated Press learned of his case, which until now has not been made public, as part of a six-month look at the soaring global challenge of drug resistance.

Juarez's strain — so-called extremely drug-resistant (XXDR) TB — has never before been seen in the US, according to Dr David Ashkin, one of the nation's leading experts on tuberculosis. XXDR tuberculosis is so rare that only a handful of other people in the world are thought to have had it.

Forty years ago, the world thought it had conquered TB and any number of other diseases through the new wonder drugs: Antibiotics. US Surgeon General William H. Stewart

announced it was "time to close the book on infectious diseases and declare the war against pestilence won".

Today, all the leading killer infectious diseases on the planet — TB, malaria and HIV among them — are mutating at an alarming rate, hitchhiking their way in and out of countries. The reason: Overuse and misuse of the very drugs that were supposed to save us.

Just as the drugs were a man-made solution to dangerous illness, the problem with them is also manmade. It is fuelled worldwide by everything from counterfeit drugmakers to the unintended consequences of giving drugs to the poor without properly monitoring their treatment. — AP