

Article 1

Metro / South Texas

Spacesuits for a biolab ; French company is making customized gear for S.A. scientists.

Cindy Tumiel
EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

734 words

13 December 2003

San Antonio Express-News

Metro

8B

English

(c) Copyright 2003 San Antonio Express-News. All Rights Reserved.

Leave it to the French to come up with haute couture for the hot lab.

In a few weeks, the specially trained scientists who work in the top-level biocontainment lab at the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research will pause in their busy day to meet with a tailor, who will measure inseams, arm lengths, waists and other body dimensions.

Leave it to the French to come up with haute couture for the hot lab.

In a few weeks, the specially trained scientists who work in the top-level biocontainment lab at the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research will pause in their busy day to meet with a tailor, who will measure inseams, arm lengths, waists and other body dimensions.

The exacting measurements won't be sewn up into new duds of finely woven silk or wool. Instead, it seems French designers momentarily have turned their attention from the Paris runway models to the scientists who work with deadly viruses like Ebola and Lhasa fever.

Early next year the San Antonio foundation will receive a custom-made PVC spacesuit for each of the scientists who works in one of the few biosafety level 4, or **BSL4**, laboratories in the country.

The new suits are a welcome present for the dozen scientists who will get them. They now spend their time in the high security lab sealed inside cumbersome, generic-sized plastic blue spacesuits that protect them from the dangerous viruses, but don't really fit anyone properly.

"This is the first redesign of the **suit** since the first labs were built in the '50s," said Jean Patterson, director of virology at the foundation.

"When you work in this kind of situation, nobody wants to change anything that works. But the French were building these kinds of labs and decided these suits were too uncomfortable, and so they built a better mousetrap."

The new suits are from Delta Protection, a French firm that now is one of the few in the world making such gear.

The New York City-based Edouard Foundation Inc. is buying a dozen of the \$2,000 suits as a Christmas gift of sorts.

Two suits were bought last month for two scientists to try. A check for 10 more was presented Tuesday during a holiday reception at the biomedical foundation on Southwest Loop 410.

"The other suits never fit," said laboratory scientific manager Alex Hamill, one of the scientists already measured and fitted with a **suit**. "This one fits."

Hamill's current work involves testing various compounds for anti-viral activity against Ebola, SARS and other viruses. He spends three to four hours at a time sealed inside a protective bubble and attached to a special

breathing system while he works with deadly pathogens for which there is no known treatment or cure.

Edouard Foundation board member Ron Finch said members of the family foundation were impressed by the work of the biomedical research institution, particularly its probe of emerging diseases that terrorists may be trying to turn into biological weapons.

"That really hit home," Finch said. "What we try to do is not start new programs but find out what existing programs truly need."

The suits now used are weighty garments made of material similar to tire inner tubes. They have plastic headgear and come with heavy boots and several layers of thick plastic gloves. The new suits are crafted of lighter-weight fabric-backed PVC, giving scientists more mobility and comfort. The headpieces are fitted better on the shoulders and are clear all around, Hamill noted, giving scientists a better field of vision.

But the suits need more air pressure than the current models. The air is for ventilation and breathing and forms an extra measure of protection - if the **suit** is ever cut or damaged in the lab, the air pressure will blow pathogens away.

Foundation scientists won't be able to use the suits until all the new models are in hand and the air pressure system for the lab is retooled, Patterson said.

ctumiel@express-news.net

PHOTO: GLORIA FERNIZ/STAFF Alex Hamill demonstrates how to put on the new hot **suit** he and other scientists at the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research will use. The old **suit** hangs behind him.

Document SAEN000020031215dzcd0001j

More Like This

Related Factiva Intelligent Indexing™

+