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BIOSECURITY

Keeping Track of Toxins

Academics like freedom and loathe paperwork, so it's no surprise there's been grumbling over last week's new federal requirements for research on dangerous pathogens. The government's "final interim rule" makes it a criminal offense not to report the possession of about 60 toxins and viruses deemed "select agents" (like smallpox) and also requires labs to step up security (which may include adding guards to document people and packages)—hardly the usual culture for scientific research. While the guidelines are intended to keep terrorists from infiltrating labs, some fear the laws' Big Brother nature could inhibit future research. "Real biosecurity doesn't come from locking down strains or locking up information," says bioterrorism expert Steven Block of Stanford University. "It will come from methods of detecting, preventing and mitigating the diseases in the first place." These controls could slow such efforts and also prompt scientists to leave the States for countries with more lax rules, says Tomas Foral, a University of Connecticut graduate student who was charged under the USA Patriot Act for keeping an anthrax sample he found in his lab's refrigerator. (He's performing 96 hours of community service.) But there's a silver lining to homeland-security measures—lots more money. With President George W. Bush budgeting \$1.75 billion in biodefense funds, good grant writers may be crying all the way to the bank.

PHOTO (COLOR): Monitoring: New lab rules

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By Karen Springen