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ARMY ANTHRAX LAB SECURITY CALLED LAX

2002 JAN 20 — (NewsRx.com) — Security has improved at an Army laboratory that works with anthrax since the deadly microbes were mailed to two senators, but during much of the 1990s, it was not stringent enough to prevent a possible theft, former scientists at the post said.

One former researcher at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick, Frederick, Maryland, said nothing would have prevented workers from removing deadly germs from the labs.

“As far as carrying anything out, microorganisms are small,” said Luann Battersby, a biologist who left USAMRIID voluntarily in 1998 after eight years. “The problem would be getting in, not getting out.”

Another scientist, Richard Crosland, said supervisors did not often check whether researchers were keeping track of lab materials as required. When they did, some researchers just submitted photocopies of old reports, said Crosland, who was laid off from USAMRIID in 1997.

Fort Detrick spokesman Charles Dasey declined to comment on the allegations of lax security. Regarding the possibility of someone stealing anthrax from the lab, he said: “Other people are saying it could be done. I don’t expect it has been done.”

Since the anthrax mailings, which focused attention on USAMRIID as a possible source of the bacteria, Dasey said inventory control has been re-emphasized. He said a security staff conducts random exit searches and has video cameras at important laboratory areas — measures that Battersby said did not exist when she worked there.

The strain of anthrax found in letters mailed to Sens. Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy is called Ames, after the city in Iowa where researchers first isolated it. Scientists at Detrick obtained a sample from the Agriculture Department in the early 1980s for vaccine testing and gave samples to at least five other labs.

Dasey said the lab works with the Ames strain only in cultured or liquid forms, and not in the dry powdered form used in the attacks. The Army said it has accounted for all the Ames anthrax that USAMRIID produced. Yet the scientists, none of whom worked with anthrax, said it would have been easy to walk out with a few cells in a petri dish or smeared on their clothing that could then be grown and processed.

"No matter what you do, there is not any way you can prevent a determined, skillful microbiologist from stealing traces of a microbial culture that he is working with, because it takes so few microbes to start a culture," said Mark Wheelis, a University of California microbiologist who serves on a biological weapons committee of the Federation of American Scientists.

"Bioterrorism wasn't a major issue until a few years ago," he said. "Nobody was thinking that one of these respected, trusted scientists might actually steal one of the cultures with malevolent intent."

Crosland, 55, who is suing the Army for age discrimination stemming from his 1997 layoff, said the Army's lack of concern about the botulinum toxin he worked with was typical of what he observed during more than a decade at the lab.

"There was never an audit in the 11 years I was there as to what was in my laboratory and what was supposed to be there," he said.

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