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CAMPUS LABS EYED AFTER ANTHRAX SCARE

Dateline: GALVESTON, TEXAS

Every day, researchers here at the University of Texas Medical Branch reach into freezers filled with some of the world's deadliest viruses and bacteria.

The scientists are renowned for trying to develop cures for some of the most feared diseases - encephalitis, yellow fever, the plague.

Since Sept. 11, however, what goes on in the beakers and petri dishes here and at other university labs is of more than just medical curiosity. It could well impact national security.

The anthrax attacks, in particular, have suddenly brought a new level of oversight and scrutiny to an area that has largely operated in anonymity. Indeed, what has emerged in recent weeks is a portrait of a research structure about which relatively little is known - and seemingly open to easy misuse.

Now Congress wants to find out exactly what goes on behind those locked laboratory doors on campus - and do whatever it can to keep the microbes and spores from falling into the wrong hands. The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, or UTMB, will be the first university laboratory in the nation to be inspected by the Office of the Inspector General at the US Department of Health and Human Services. A group will arrive Tuesday and plans to spend up to four weeks learning just how secure the facility really is.

Because it is still unknown where the anthrax-laced letters came from, it's hard to say what went wrong. But the investigation has revealed how little the government knows about the nation's research establishment.

Officials know, for instance, that there are hundreds of labs with anthrax cultures in universities, private facilities, and public-health agencies. But they don't know the exact number because they don't keep an

inventory.

At present, roughly 250 university laboratories are registered with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to conduct research on some 30 viruses and bacteria defined as "select agents" - anthrax, the Ebola virus, and smallpox, among others. Of those, an estimated 20 to 30 are believed to be studying anthrax.

Tougher rules

What gaps in knowledge remain are likely to be filled in soon, and procedures tightened surrounding the study of microbes that can be used as bioterrorist weapons. Since the first anthrax death in October, "there has been a lot of looking into freezers and seeing what's in there," says Scott Becker, head of the Association of Public Health Laboratories in Washington.

He says many state health agencies received a wake-up call about how vulnerability the US is to a biological outbreak, when a strain of the African West Nile Virus showed up in the eastern United States in 1999. It has been linked to at least seven deaths in the New York area. Many labs began reevaluating their capabilities and realized they would be lacking if a major outbreak occurred.

But it took the events of Sept. 11 and the subsequent anthrax deaths to shake Congress into action. The Office of the Inspector General will not confirm nor deny that it will be touring UTMB, or any other campus for that matter, saying such an issue is a matter of national security.

But UTMB is excited to be the first on its list. College officials are also anxious to find out how last month's passage of the Patriot's Act will affect their work with certain "select agents," as determined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

"I don't think anybody has a clear idea how this new legislation will affect us," says Stanley Lemon, the school's dean of medicine.

The university will break ground in January on a "level 4" lab - the highest biosafety classification with the tightest security. It will be the first such lab at a US university, allowing researchers to work with previously off-limits microbes.

That may be one of the reasons the Office of the Inspector General chose to come to UTMB first. But at a time when the government is moving to clamp down on the free-flow of information, the university insists that keeping open their research findings is critical to the solution.

"The whole notion of a university is the free exchange of information and intellectual interchange," says Lemon.

There have been times in the past that universities have worked with the government to create weapons - and, thus, had to keep quiet about their research and findings. But this is a different scenario: More information means less danger, says Adrian Perachio, UTMB's vice president for research.

"The more people know about our ability to defend ourselves from such a threat, the less attractive we will make it to potential terrorists," he says.

Holes in the net

Prior to 1996, the ability to obtain some of the most deadly microbes was relatively easy. That was proved when an Ohio State student affiliated with a white supremacist group used fake letterhead to obtain the bacterium that causes the plague.

He was arrested and charged with mail fraud because there was no law to charge him for possession of such a substance. So Congress enacted the 1996 Anti-Terrorism Act, which says that anyone sending or receiving dangerous microbes must register with the CDC and prove a legitimate scientific reason for working with it.

But some believe there are still holes in the law that need to be closed - and many expect that they will be.

"There's a steep learning curve right now," says Dr. Perachio. "Is there something we haven't thought about? Well, we've never found ourselves in this state of affairs before."

Part of the problem, say experts, is that each lab works differently and independently. So the Association of Public Health Laboratories is urging Congress to consider five new steps, including a better communications network and better tracking system, increased staffing, improved facilities, and updated equipment. All of this takes money, though.

"For years and years and years, the nation did not see the need to spend money on these labs, until recently," says Mr. Becker.

Last year, the CDC funneled \$8.3 million to state labs for biological terrorism. After the anthrax scare, they earmarked \$28 million for labs in 2002. But Becker and his group believe that's still not enough. They think proper funding - for increased security and updated equipment - is more like \$125 million.

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By Kris Axtman, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

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