



LATEST NEWS

CDC suspends A&M research on infectious diseases

11:18 PM CDT on Sunday, July 1, 2007

By EMILY RAMSHAW / The Dallas Morning News
eramshaw@dallasnews.com

AUSTIN – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has indefinitely suspended all of Texas A&M University's federally sanctioned research on the most dangerous infectious diseases after the university's failure to report two 2006 cases of human exposure to biological agents.

Mike McKinney, chancellor of the Texas A&M System, said that before Saturday's decision, the CDC had already halted the university's research on one of the two agents the lab workers were exposed to. He said he supports federal authorities' decision to expand that research ban to all "select agents" monitored by the agency.

"I'm one of those who says, when you find a problem, you ought to take care of it," said Dr. McKinney, who says he didn't learn of the 2006 incidents until about a month ago. "I have a whole bunch of frustration, but it's not with the CDC."

In a memo sent to the university Saturday, the CDC questions whether A&M meets biosafety standards and has an appropriate security plan. The memo says CDC officials plan to revisit the campus this month, and it demands dozens of records and interviews with key researchers.

The letter warns that the university could permanently lose the authority to work with select agents if researchers don't follow federal guidelines.

In a statement, A&M interim President Eddie Davis said the university takes the matter seriously and intends to comply with federal rules.

"We plan to cooperate fully with the CDC and look forward to resolving this matter in an appropriate manner as quickly as possible," Dr. Davis said, "so that we can move forward in our work supporting the nation's homeland defense initiatives."

News of the A&M incidents emerged last week when The Sunshine Project, an Austin-based bioweapons watchdog group, released records showing that three biodefense researchers were exposed to Q fever in April 2006. Just two months earlier, another lab worker fell ill after being infected with Brucella.

Edward Hammond, who directs The Sunshine Project, said this is the first time he's heard of such a CDC ban, one he's sure will send shockwaves through research universities across the country.

And he said it serves as a "serious blow" to A&M's campaign to host the new National Bio and Agro-

Defense Facility, a major federal biological agents lab the Department of Homeland Security will award in 2008.

"How could any government agency in good conscience put an institution in A&M's situation in charge of what's going to be one of the largest biodefense labs in the world?" Mr. Hammond asked.

In the Brucella case, university officials acknowledge that they did not follow protocols for reporting such incidents to the CDC, but they dispute allegations that they broke the rules with the Q fever exposure. No one died from the diseases, which, while rarely fatal in humans, cause flulike symptoms that are difficult to cure. Neither is easily contagious among humans, so there was no widespread public danger.

Both incidents have been under investigation by the CDC and the U.S. Health and Human Services Department's inspector general since April, and Dr. McKinney said he expects some resolution by the end of the month.

Homeland Security link

Texas A&M heads the National Center for Foreign Animal and Zoonotic Disease Defense, one of 10 "centers of excellence" around the nation. The A&M center is funded by an \$18 million U.S. Department of Homeland Security biodefense research grant.

A&M researchers have been studying vaccines for Brucella and Q fever, both of which are considered "terror agents" that could be used in biological warfare.

The Q fever case came to light after routine blood tests showed that three lab workers had elevated levels of certain antibodies, indicating they'd been exposed to the agent. None of the researchers fell ill.

CDC officials say they never received documentation on the Q fever exposure. But university officials say that they contacted the CDC on the exposures and that the agency told them it wasn't serious enough to warrant a formal report. The university has since changed its policy to require reporting of exposures, even when there's no evidence of infection.

The Brucella infection occurred when a female lab worker climbed into a chamber used to expose mice to the agent in an attempt to disinfect it. She was home sick for several weeks before she was diagnosed with brucellosis, and she had to take two months' worth of antibiotics to fully recover.

An e-mail released by the university shows that at least one principal researcher knew the university was supposed to report the illness to the CDC, but the mandatory report on the Brucella infection wasn't sent for a year.

Consequences

Dr. McKinney said that the university has suspended that researcher in the Brucella lab pending the outcome of the investigation and that "there are some other people who probably should've been dealt with." He didn't indicate that anyone would be fired, though.

"This is where I get mad, where I get extremely upset, because it looks like you're trying to cover something up," Dr. McKinney said. "The responsibility on all of this stuff, it goes to the top. And you destroy your own credibility if you don't follow the rules."

Federal rules on select agents require researchers to inform the CDC of potential security breaches immediately and to file formal reports within seven days. Penalties include steep fines or loss of federal funding. Select agents are the most serious and infectious – including everything from the ebola virus to smallpox.

Dr. McKinney said that since he learned of the exposures, he has brought in a disease safety expert to examine the university's protocols and hired an attorney to get to the bottom of why the suspected infections occurred and weren't reported.

"I want to name names, fix the blame," he said. "I want the unadulterated, unvarnished truth."