

# Be Paranoid about Bioterrorism, Experts Say

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Experts on national security, health and biotechnology shared one message on the threat of bioterrorism Tuesday -- be paranoid.

They said the United States and other nations had finally heard the message that governments or extremist groups could make easy use of germs such as anthrax or smallpox to wreak havoc, but had yet to do much about it.

What efforts are being made were bogged down in politics and turf wars, the experts said at a meeting on bioterrorism.

"Be paranoid," George Poste, chief executive officer of Health Technology Networks, a health care consulting group in Scottsdale, Arizona, told the conference.

"We are vulnerable," he said.

Defense and health officials have agreed since the mid-1990s that the risk of a bioterrorist attack was high enough to warrant taking precautions. A weapon containing anthrax -- bacteria that cause a deadly infection when inhaled -- would be cheap, easy to make and hard to detect.

"In my judgment, Washington, if not the nation, is past the level of consciousness-raising," said Richard Falkenrath, an expert in defense preparedness at Harvard University. "Now we are getting down to the serious and much more difficult process of building a (response) system."

But Falkenrath and others agreed not enough money was being spent and it was not clear

who would be in charge in the event of such an attack. "U.S. biodefense is disorganized and excessively fragmented," he said.

A recent \$3 million exercise called TOPOFF (for top officials of the U.S. government) showed how things could fall apart. Conducted last May, it was a simulation of simultaneous attacks -- chemical weapons in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, plague in Denver and a nuclear "event" in Washington, D.C.

## HOSPITALS QUICKLY OVERWHELMED

The exercise showed hospitals were overwhelmed, officials fought over who was in charge and hundreds of "victims" would have died if it had been a real emergency.

Falkenrath said the White House and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were the only federal offices with the authority to coordinate the myriad of federal, state and local agencies that would have to be involved in responding to such attacks.

"In my view, neither is really doing the job effectively," Falkenrath said.

Some of the \$13 billion allocated to dealing with weapons of mass destruction has already gone to programs more political than useful, he said.

"I see an increasingly wide stratum of pork in there," he said, while later declining to elaborate.

Dr. Jeff Koplan, head of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control

and Prevention (CDC), said federal programs were slow getting off the ground.

"We are barely getting started," Koplan told the conference, sponsored by Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

He said \$123.6 million was allocated to his agency for bioterrorism preparedness in 1999, and \$154.68 million for 2000. Yet Koplan said state and federal health officials were still using pencil and paper and telephones while their children surfed the Internet to shop.

"We would like to correct that," he said.

He said 81 CDC labs in 50 states could now test for the six biological agents considered most likely to be used in an attack -- plague, tularemia, botulin toxin, smallpox and viral hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola and anthrax.

The CDC has set up eight so-called Push Packages, each consisting of 109 air cargo containers full of antibiotics and other medical supplies that could be shipped anywhere on 12 hours notice. He and Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher decide when and where to deploy them.

He said the decision to send them was quick, but the TOPOFF exercise showed things start to fall apart when the packages need to be distributed.

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