

# Lab chemicals removed from Texas campus

Questions raised over biosecurity after student found with vials from university.

Eugenie Samuel Reich

15 March 2012

A former graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin is enmeshed in a US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) inquiry after he was stopped for a traffic offence and found to have lab chemicals and equipment in his car.

Karl Jasheway was pulled over by Travis County police near Austin in December 2011 and charged with driving while intoxicated. The FBI's interest in Jasheway only emerged on 9 March as a result of a public-information request filed by Austin-based biosafety advocate Ed Hammond.

At the time of the incident, Jasheway was studying for a PhD in the laboratory of biologist Jon Robertus, known for his pioneering work on the structure of transfer RNA. Jasheway's research was part of the lab's federally funded work to develop an antidote for ricin, a highly toxic protein found in the castor oil plant *Ricinus communis* and a potential bioterror agent. Jasheway's work involved using a non-toxic component of the protein called the ricin A chain.

A statement from the university alleges that Jasheway had 11 vials owned by the university when he was stopped. Subsequent tests revealed that two of the vials contained ricin A chain.

Peter Schneider, director of environmental health and safety for the university, confirms that ricin A is used in the lab where Jasheway was a student. "We suspect that's where [the vials] came from," he says. He adds that removal of the vials from the lab would not have been authorized, because the protocol approved for the lab's use of ricin A allows for removal only when the chemical is being disposed of, which Schneider's department would handle.

No evidence has surfaced of Jasheway's involvement in any criminal activities involving ricin. The episode came to light when Hammond asked the university for details of any biosafety incidents in its research labs since 2009. In response, the university sought to withhold the release of three records because of an "an ongoing criminal investigation" by the FBI.

After the roadside discovery was made, Travis County police informed the university and its police visited Jasheway's apartment. There they found 44 measuring tubes belonging to the university. According to Schneider, these tubes were empty.

FBI spokesman Erik Vasys could not confirm whether there is an investigation into Jasheway because it is FBI policy to protect the reputation of people when an allegation is yet to be proved. University officials could not shed light on what the FBI is investigating. Robertus says that he has been asked not to comment on Jasheway because of student-privacy regulations.

Jasheway's Facebook profile contains material that may have attracted investigators' interest, including images of bleeding faces, a man in a lab coat receiving an injection by syringe and a sketch of the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, the US terrorist who engaged in a campaign using mail bombs for years until his arrest in 1996. Jasheway's name has also turned up on a Chinese website enquiring about shipping a small amount of a banned synthetic cannabinoid to the United States. *Nature* was unable to verify that Jasheway himself was responsible for these postings.

A search of the Robertus lab by university authorities after the incident uncovered a small amount of potentially hazardous whole ricin, which has since been destroyed, says Schneider. Robertus says that he stopped working with the toxic form of the protein 25 years ago and asked lab personnel to destroy all samples of it, so he was surprised and not very happy when some was found.

Hammond says that regardless of whether the FBI investigation results in charges, it is a reminder that the large number of researchers in the United States working on hazardous materials with the goal of thwarting a bioterrorist attack could themselves pose



Travis County Sheriff's Office  
Karl Jasheway.

a risk to public safety. “The information made available to date brings to mind the domestic and insider threats posed by the over-bloated US biodefence programme,” says Hammond.

On 8 March, the US Senate voted to reauthorize legislation providing US\$2.6 billion for the research and development of biodefence countermeasures. Some biosafety advocates worry that the greater the number of researchers with access to dangerous agents, the greater the risk of an accident or bioterrorist incident.

Jasheway did not respond to *Nature's* efforts to contact him. Jasheway's attorney, Gerry Morris, who is based in Austin, did respond but declined to comment on the details of this article, noting that he rarely comments on pending matters involving his clients.

*Nature* | doi:10.1038/nature.2012.10238