Terror watchdog set up for 'dual use' biology

Erika Check, Washington

The US government has created a high-level advisory body that will suggest guidelines for scientists whose work might be used by bioterrorists.

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, some biologists have worried that the federal government might respond to concerns by imposing a clampdown on their work. So the latest plan has been cautiously welcomed as an indication that the life-sciences community will be allowed to police itself.

On 4 March, Tommy Thompson, the health secretary, announced the creation of a National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity. The board will be appointed by Thompson's office and is expected to be up and running by the autumn.

As well as giving advice to government departments about how to approve and manage 'dual-use' projects, which have the potential to be used in bioweapons, the board is expected to advise publishers on policies for handling sensitive papers, and researchers on what they can talk about at open scientific meetings.

None of the recommendations will be mandatory, government officials say — but agencies may choose to make adherence to the guidelines mandatory for their grantees.

Helping hand: Elias Zerhouni, Anthony Fauci and Tommy Thompson launch a National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity that will guide researchers.

Thompson and John Marburger, president Bush's science adviser, said that the board is being created partly in response to a report by the US National Academy of Sciences. Marburger added that that the administration has been concerned by a series of recent research reports with dual-use potential, such as a paper about the creation of a synthetic polio virus (J. Cello *et al. Science* **297,** 1016–1018; 2002).

Elias Zerhouni, director of the National Institutes of Health, whose office will house the board's secretariat, said that its workings will be modelled largely on those of the Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC), which was created in 1974 to imple-ment rules for conducting studies using recombinant DNA.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said the RAC has worked because it created a "culture of responsibility" that has been adopted by researchers in universities and industry. Its rules are generally implemented by local institutional biosafety committees, which will also implement the new guidelines, officials said.

Biologists' groups have cautiously welcomed the plan. "We haven't seen a complete picture, but it seems to sponsor open research and involvement of scientists," says Janet Shoemaker, director for public and scientific affairs at the American Society for Microbiology.

But some security experts object to the fact that the advisory board will not have the power to make compliance with its rules mandatory. "I find it very curious that they accept the need for mandatory oversight of access to pathogens but reject the idea of mandatory oversight of consequential work with those pathogens," said Elisa Harris, pathogen projects coordinator at the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland in College Park. "It's the work that has the greatest potential to cause destruction or harm on a catastrophic scale." ■

Nigerian states disrupt campaign to eradicate polio

Declan Butler, Paris

A boycott by two Nigerian states of an immunization campaign by the World Health Organization-led Global Polio Eradication Initiative could jeopardize its goal of eradicating the disease by the end of this year.

Kano and Zamfara states refused to take part in a February campaign by the World Health Organization (WHO) in west and central Africa that aimed to immunize 63 million children. Muslim clerics there have claimed that the vaccines are contaminated with contraceptives, carry HIV and are a Western plot against their populations.

Some community leaders are also saying that the vaccine causes AIDS, having picked up on an international debate over the now-refuted claim that it was the origin of the AIDS virus (see *Nature* 404, 9; 2000). "If you search for 'polio vaccine' on the Internet you find a lot of stuff — not all of it good," says Oliver Rosenbauer, a WHO spokesman.

Such claims led several states in northern Nigeria to boycott a WHO campaign in August. Since then the federal government has backed immunization, and in October, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which represents 56 Muslim nations, gave its support to the polio-eradication initiative.

But two uncooperative states is still two too many, warns Rosenbauer, who says that eradication must take place in all territories. The virus must be eliminated wherever it remains, he warns, as a single case could spawn an outbreak.

Indeed, last summer's boycott by several of Nigeria's northern states is seen as responsible for the country having the largest number of new polio cases — 347 from the start of 2003 to February 2004, nearly half of all new cases worldwide. It is also blamed for 20 new polio cases in recent months in 8 previously polio-free African countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo.

Nigeria has since set up joint team of scientists and community leaders to look at the vaccine's safety. It is expected to release its report officially later this month. WHO officials are optimistic that this will be in time for the two states to consider their position ahead of the next round of immunization in late March.

"All the indications are that the tests have proved negative for any harmful or suspicious agents, and in particular, none of those allegedly capable of promoting birth control were detected," says Idris Mohammed, chairman of Nigeria's National Programme on Immunization.

But even if all Nigerian states comply, the publicity surrounding the rumours has sown seeds of doubt about polio vaccination among some community leaders. To what extent this affects the latest campaign will only become known later this month, when an analysis of data coverage is completed. ■

▶ **www.polioeradication.org**

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