US military accidentally ships live anthrax to labs

At least nine facilities in the United States and one in South Korea received spores.

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The US Department of Defense (DOD) announced on 27 May that it had accidentally shipped live anthrax spores to labs in nine US states and a US military base in South Korea.

The facilities that received the samples did not have systems in place to protect lab employees against anthrax exposure because they were expecting to receive spores that had been killed with radiation. It is not clear how many people were actually exposed. The DOD says that 22 people in South Korea are getting preventive treatment, but it has not confirmed how many people in the United States are being treated.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, which regulates all research on a set of dangerous pathogens called select agents, is working with the DOD to investigate how the incident occurred.

“This is gross negligence,” says Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist and biosecurity specialist at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey. “There is absolutely no excuse. Not for the shipping institution. Not for receiving institutions that failed to confirm inactivation upon receipt.”

The incident follows a series of biosafety lapses in last summer at US government agencies, including an episode in which the CDC failed to inactive anthrax spores before shipping them to labs unprepared to handle them. No one contracted disease as a result of these events. But the CDC temporarily shut down shipments of infectious agents from its high-level biosafety labs.

Safety investigations

In August, the White House asked government agencies, including the DOD, to 'stand-down' on pathogen research until they had completed a thorough evaluation of biosafety and biosecurity practices. At press time, the DOD had not responded to questions from *Nature* about whether it participated in the stand-down.

“I think even if they weren’t part of it, it’s concerning,” says Amesh Adalja, an infectious-disease physician at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Pennsylvania who studies biosecurity issues. “When the CDC incident was revealed, it should have caused every lab to review its practices. The attention put on CDC’s problems should have been on every lab.”

Ebright is not surprised. “The stand-down was strictly for show,” he says. “It was predictable it would have no impact, and it has taken only months for this to be borne out. Such incidents — including near-exact repeats — will continue to occur, again and again, until Congress steps in and closes programmes.”

Adalja is concerned that the incident could rekindle public worry about the military’s biosafety and biosecurity practices. In 2010, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation has concluded that a DOD employee with access to a military anthrax lab shipped live spores to lawmakers and news organizations in 2001. Five people died and 17 fell ill as a result of the incidents.

Military labs are supposed to be a line of defence against bioterrorism, but they themselves can become a danger if researchers do not take proper precautions, Adalja says. “People start questioning why we are working with these pathogens,” he says. “You don’t want the public to lose confidence in our ability to do research.” He adds that it is important to remember that live anthrax spores are shipped frequently between labs, but usually the recipient labs know what they are getting.

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