Biosafety Problems at Texas A&M

Texas A&M University (TAMU) in College Station was recently ordered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to halt all research on microbes known as select agents—pathogens with the potential to be used in biological warfare. In 2004, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security awarded TAMU $18 million over three years to lead a research center on bioterrorism.

The unprecedented action by the CDC followed admission by the university in April that it had failed to report two cases of pathogen exposure in 2006. The incidents involved the bacteria that cause brucellosis and Q fever, livestock diseases that can infect humans and are on the federal list of potential bioweapons. In February 2006, a lab worker developed brucellosis which was successfully treated with antibiotics. One month later, three other workers tested positive for the bacterium that causes Q fever, but they didn’t become sick.

Notification of the brucellosis case prompted the CDC to conduct an inspection at TAMU in April, which they followed up with a letter stating that “numerous serious deficiencies in biosafety and security” had been found. While Texas A&M officials admitted that the failure to report the brucellosis infection was a mistake, they said that federal regulations did not require them to report the Q fever exposures. A CDC inspection of TAMU facilities this month could result in a permanent revocation of the university’s permission to conduct research on select agents.

The CDC’s concerns are based upon university and investigator responsibilities in this type of research, which include: (1) ensuring that select agents and toxins are used in a safe manner that is commensurate with their risk; (2) implementing a security plan that prevents access to select agents and toxins by unauthorized persons; and (3) ensuring that the university’s occupational health program provides effective medical surveillance of occupational exposures to select agents and toxins.

Biosafety at ISU

It is important that all ISU employees are properly protected, regardless of whether they are working with select agents, toxins, animal or human pathogens, chemicals, etc. If your employees work with these materials, please don’t forget to enroll them in the Occupational Medicine Program. This program identifies potential occupational health hazards and ensures that adequate measures are taken to properly protect employee health and safety.

Environmental Health and Safety (EH&S) coordinates ISU employee participation in the program. Any new personnel who may be exposed to hazards in the workplace are required to complete a Hazard Inventory for Occupational Medical Surveillance.

For more information about the Occupational Medicine Program, contact Alan White, EH&S, 4-9364; Dr. Steven Sheldahl, Occupational Medicine, 4-2056; or go to www.ehs.iastate.edu/cms/default.asp?action=article&ID=59.

(Adapted from articles in The Chronicle of Higher Education, July 5, and ScienceNOW, July 2.)