

Casualties of Bush "anti-terror" campaign: Three deaths linked to smallpox vaccine

Patrick Martin
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The Bush administration's campaign to vaccinate hundreds of thousands of health care workers against smallpox has virtually ground to a halt since three people died in a four-day span after receiving smallpox inoculations. All three were over 50 and at risk for heart disease and the vaccine may have triggered fatal heart attacks in each case.

Andrea Cornitcher, 56, a nurse at the Peninsula Regional Medial Center in Salisbury, Maryland, collapsed and died March 23, five days after receiving her smallpox vaccination. Virginia Jorgensen, 57, a nurse's assistant in St. Petersburg, died March 26, ten days after suffering a heart attack. She had been inoculated February 26. A 55-year-old national guardsman died March 27, two days after his inoculation. His identity has not yet been made public.

In response to these deaths, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued an emergency notification to health care providers that are administering the vaccine, instructing them to halt vaccinations for anyone over 50 with a history of heart disease or with three or more risk factors for the disease—such as smoking, hypertension, or a family history.

The CDC is now investigating as many as 18 cases of cardiac-related complications among the 25,000 health care workers who have been inoculated—a far higher rate than expected. The death rate, about one in 10,000, is one hundred times the rate experienced in the 1960s and earlier, when smallpox vaccination was widespread. The rate of serious complications is 20 times what was expected.

Since the Bush administration launched the smallpox vaccination campaign on January 24, barely five percent of the 500,000 health care workers targeted have agreed to participate in the voluntary program. Concerns over the possible side effects of the vaccine

have combined with widespread skepticism about the Bush administration's claims that a biological warfare attack on the American population is imminent.

The three deaths are likely to put the program on hold altogether. Vaccinations have been halted by state health departments in Arizona, California, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Vermont and Washington state. The state of Idaho recommended that local health departments suspend the vaccinations for the time being, while Florida ordered all volunteers re-screened for possible heart disease.

Bush administration officials and the CDC appear to have grossly underestimated the potential dangers of the vaccination program, in part because they relied on figures from the 1960s, when the vaccine was administered mainly to children, and from more recent campaigns in the military, where most recipients were young and healthy adults. Both populations were at low risk for heart disease. The Pentagon, for instance, reported only 10 cases of heart inflammation among 350,000 soldiers inoculated in recent months. All ten recovered quickly.

In the current campaign, two thirds of the health care workers volunteering for vaccination are over 45, making them far more likely to be susceptible to heart complications. The concentration on older workers was actually considered a positive aspect of the campaign, since unlike younger workers, most of the over-45s would have received a smallpox vaccination in their youth.

Critics of the inoculation campaign dismissed the CDC's emergency notification to withhold the vaccine from at-risk volunteers, since many middle-aged workers are not aware they have heart disease. They called for suspension of the campaign, or at least a halt in vaccinating all those over 45.

A CDC advisory committee, however, rejected a proposal to suspend vaccination for those over 50. Guthrie Birkhead, a committee member and director of the Center for Community Health at the New York State Department of Health, said eliminating all those over 50 would make the entire effort unviable. “We are taking extraordinary precautions because of a theoretical concern,” she said.

While officials dismiss the deaths of three people as “theoretical”, the entire smallpox vaccination campaign is a response to an alleged threat for which no concrete evidence exists. Smallpox was eradicated as a disease in the 1970s, and the only known samples of the virus are in the vaults of the CDC itself and a similar facility in Russian Siberia.

The current campaign is based on a hysterical appeal to vague fears of biological terrorism, deliberately whipped up by the Bush administration to generate public support for its plans for military aggression against Iraq and new repressive measures within the US.

The administration has demonstrated its lack of real concern for the American people—despite incessant fear-mongering over terrorism—by refusing to provide adequate compensation for health care workers and other vaccine recipients who suffer from serious side effects.

The Department of Health and Human Services refused to offer any form of compensation until early March, when six weeks of pro-vaccination propaganda had produced a derisory 12,000 volunteers, compared to the projected 500,000. Participation was weakest in major cities, where political hostility to the Bush administration is the most widespread. By February 28, only 33 health care workers had agreed to be vaccinated in New York City, 61 in Los Angeles, 18 in Chicago and four in Washington, DC.

On March 6, the Bush administration introduced a plan to provide a maximum of \$262,000 in compensation for death or permanent disability resulting from the vaccine, with a ceiling of \$50,000 on compensation for earnings lost from shorter-term disability or illness. The most reactionary feature of the plan was that it would limit compensation to those who were vaccinated during the first 180 days after passage of the legislation, thus pressuring health care workers to make an early decision on getting the vaccine.

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the Service Employees International Union, and the American Nurses Association all criticized the legislation as grossly inadequate, and characterized the time limit on compensation as unethical. Even the Republican-controlled House of Representatives has proved incapable, so far, of adopting the bill: it failed its first test vote, on April 1, with 206 voting against and 184 supporting.



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