

Anthrax scientist and suspect an apparent suicide

Patrick Martin
2 August 2008

The death of Bruce E. Ivins, an anthrax specialist at the US Army's bio-weapons laboratory at Fort Detrick, near Frederick, Maryland, likely means the shutting down of any further investigation into the mailing of anthrax-laced letters to prominent Democrats and media personalities during the months following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Ivins, 62, a researcher at the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID), reportedly took an overdose of prescription-strength Tylenol and codeine just after 1 a.m. Sunday at his home. He was taken unconscious to Frederick Memorial Hospital and died there Tuesday.

Press reports citing FBI and Justice Department officials said that Ivins had emerged over the past few months as the leading suspect in the anthrax mailings. Relatives and co-workers had given testimony before the federal grand jury hearing evidence in the case. Five people died and 17 fell ill as a result of exposure to the anthrax letters in September, October and November 2001.

His attorney, Paul Kemp, said that Ivins had been notified a few days before his death that he was about to be indicted. Justice Department officials confirmed that they would have sought the death penalty in the case.

In a written statement, Kemp blamed the suicide on the intensity of the FBI attention to his client, declaring, "The relentless pressure of accusation and innuendo takes its toll in different ways on different people, as has already been seen in this investigation. In Dr. Ivins' case, it led to his untimely death."

The FBI raided Ivins' home twice in the course of its investigation of the anthrax mailings, and by the spring of 2008 was systematically interviewing his associates and friends, placing them under court order to keep

silent about the probe.

In late June, the FBI reached a \$5.8 million settlement with Steven Hatfill, previously identified as the government's prime suspect in the case, and publicly exonerated him for the mailings. This action may have triggered a mental or emotional breakdown in Ivins, who was committed to a local mental health facility in early July for treatment of severe depression, including threats of suicide.

On July 24, Ivins was released from the hospital, only to be served with a temporary restraining order the same day barring him from contact with Jean C. Duley, a social worker who had counseled him. Three days later, and four days before he was to appear in court for a hearing on the restraining order, Ivins took the fatal overdose.

Duley said she was to testify before the grand jury, but it is not clear what role, if any, she played in linking Ivins to the anthrax attacks. She told the local judge who issued the restraining order that the FBI was investigating Ivins and would charge him with five counts of capital murder. "Client has a history dating to his graduate days of homicidal threats, plans and actions towards therapists," she wrote, adding that his psychiatrist, Dr. David Irwin, "called him homicidal, sociopathic with clear intentions."

Friends and family members said that Ivins had been escorted off the premises of Fort Detrick recently by police because of his increasingly erratic conduct. He had been told that he would be forced to retire in September and not allowed to return to work. Ivins had been at the facility for some 36 years, most of them working on vaccines for anthrax contamination.

Ivins' death raises a host of questions, not least of which is why it took the FBI nearly seven years to target him as a principal suspect. He was one of only a

few dozen scientists with the skill and experience required to transform anthrax spores into a lethal weapon that could be delivered through the mail. Yet his main involvement in the early years of the anthrax investigation was as a scientific expert for the FBI. He was one of the first scientists to handle the anthrax letters which the FBI now suggests he may have mailed himself.

There were several incidents during those years that would have cast suspicion on Ivins if the FBI and Justice Department had been conducting a serious investigation. In December 2001, and again in April 2002, Ivins conducted unauthorized sampling and testing for anthrax contamination inside the USAMRIID laboratory.

The first instance came after a woman technician expressed fears that she had been exposed to anthrax spores. Ivins found traces of anthrax and decontaminated the area, but did not report the incident to authorities. The second time, he found anthrax spores in his own office and in several other locations, but again concealed this fact from the Army and from the FBI.

When he finally reported both incidents in late April 2002, the Army decided not to discipline him, according to a subsequent report in *USA Today*, because “penalizing Ivins might discourage other employees from voluntarily reporting accidental spills of ‘hot’ agents.”

The scientist continued to work with anthrax and in 2003 he and two colleagues received the highest honor given to Pentagon civilian employees for their work on techniques to manufacture an anthrax vaccine. He continued to publish research papers on anthrax as late as June 2008.

According to an account published in the *Los Angeles Times* Friday, former USAMRIID officials now say that at least some parts of Ivins’ account of the two contamination incidents were not credible and should have been questioned.

The press accounts of the anthrax investigation, based on statements given by unidentified FBI and Justice Department officials after Ivins’ apparent suicide, continue the pattern that has prevailed throughout the seven-year probe, in which the authorities systematically downplay the evident right-wing political motivation behind the attacks, which targeted

two of the most prominent Democratic senators, Tom Daschle, then majority leader, and Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

Ivins was a conservative Roman Catholic who frequently wrote letters to the local newspaper in Frederick, Maryland discussing his strong religious convictions. There has been little commentary in the media or from government sources about his political views, however, or whether these influenced the selection of targets for the attacks.

Instead, unnamed officials floated the suggestion that Ivins may have wanted to spur government investment into anthrax research by creating a public panic with the anthrax mailings. He was reported to have complained that the testing conditions for anthrax vaccines were too restrictive because there were not enough monkeys available as test subjects and because testing on animals could not replicate human responses to treatment for anthrax contamination.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact