

US Centers for Disease Control anthrax investigations reveal widespread safety issues

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Earlier this month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States concluded a second internal review of its practices, following the realization that up to 86 of its workers may have been exposed to anthrax. The review, which found “multiple other problems,” comes a little more than a year after the government agency was forced to reduce its budget by almost \$1 billion due to the across-the-board cut in domestic spending known as the “sequester.”

On June 13, the agency announced that 86 people were possibly exposed to anthrax because of improper safety procedures at its Bioterrorism Rapid Response and Advanced Technology (BRRAT) laboratory in Atlanta.

Workers in the laboratory did not properly inactivate anthrax samples on which experiments were being conducted. They also did not wait the required 48 hours before sending off the samples to other labs. As a result, workers at three other laboratories did not use the proper safety equipment while working on the active bacteria.

In the aftermath of the incident, which could have led to many deaths, two investigations took place, the head of the lab in question resigned, and the director of the agency, Tom Frieden, testified before Congress.

Frieden told Congress, “With the recent incidents, we recognize a pattern at CDC where we need to greatly improve the culture of safety.”

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) also conducted its own investigation into the incident. It found “no clear management oversight of the incident within the various laboratories that were impacted.”

The USDA also found many other troubling problems. Zip lock bags were sometimes used to transfer extremely dangerous material. Refrigerators holding dangerous material were kept unlocked.

Disinfectants used by CDC laboratories to make an area safe were past their expiration date. Employees were not properly trained in disinfecting areas and did not know what to do if an exposure occurred.

While both the CDC and the USDA were investigating the anthrax incident, another serious safety lapse occurred in which a deadly avian flu virus was improperly handled. One laboratory had accidentally mixed a deadly strain of the bird flu into a benign strain. The sample that was supposed to be benign was sent to another laboratory, killing that lab’s birds.

Frieden said that what was most troubling about this incident was that he did not learn about it until the agency conducted an internal review.

In 2013, the CDC was severely affected by sequestration cuts. The center’s 2013 budget was ten percent lower than its 2012 budget. The total cut was just under \$1 billion. In its budget memo, the center said that “every area of CDC was affected,” with no program left uncut.

The full list of cuts was as follows: \$100 million to immunization; \$62 million to AIDS, hepatitis, STI and TB prevention; \$13 million to emerging infectious diseases; \$195 million to chronic disease prevention and health promotion; \$7 million to birth defects and developmental disabilities; \$17 million to environmental health; \$7 million to injury prevention; \$19 million to Public Health Scientific Services; \$9 million to occupational safety services; \$18 million to global health initiatives; \$98 million to the Public Health Preparedness and Response unit; \$35 million to inter-departmental program support.

The center said that, overall, the cuts meant it would fall \$160 million short in its effort to fund public health in the United States, “a system already strained by state and local budget cuts.” The money slashed from CDC

could be recovered, for example, by not building two new F-35 fighter jets, at an estimated cost of \$618 million each.



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