

Accidents in Germ Labs and the Ebola Pandemic

By [Washington's Blog](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

Global Research, October 23, 2014

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Accidents at Germ Labs Have Occurred Worldwide

Nations such as Russia, South Africa and the U.S. have long conducted research into how to make deadly germs *even more* deadly.

And accidents at these research facilities have caused germs to escape, killing people and animals near the facilities.

For example, the Soviet research facility at Sverdlovsk conducted anthrax research during the Cold War. They isolated the most potent strain of anthrax culture and then dried it to produce a fine powder for use as an aerosol. In 1979, an accident at the facility [released anthrax, killing 100](#).

The U.S. has had its share of accidents. USA Today [noted](#) in August:

More than 1,100 laboratory incidents involving bacteria, viruses and toxins that pose significant or bioterror risks to people and agriculture were reported to federal regulators during 2008 through 2012, government reports obtained by USA TODAY show.

In two other incidents, animals were inadvertently infected with contagious diseases that would have posed significant threats to livestock industries if they had spread. One case involved the infection of two animals with hog cholera, a dangerous virus eradicated from the USA in 1978. In another incident, a cow in a disease-free herd next to a research facility studying the bacteria that cause brucellosis, became infected

The issue of lab safety and security has come under increased scrutiny by Congress in recent weeks after [a series of high-profile lab blunders at prestigious government labs](#) involving anthrax, bird flu and smallpox virus.

The new lab incident data indicate mishaps occur regularly at the more than 1,000 labs operated by 324 government, university and private organizations across the country

"More than 200 incidents of loss or release of bioweapons agents from U.S. laboratories are reported each year. This works out to more than four per week," said Richard Ebright, a biosafety expert at Rutgers university in New Jersey, who testified before Congress last month at a hearing about CDC's lab mistakes.

The only thing unusual about the CDC's recent anthrax and bird flu lab

incidents, Ebright said, is that the public found out about them. “The 2014 CDC anthrax event became known to the public only because the number of persons requiring medical evaluation was too high to conceal,” he said.

CDC officials were unavailable for interviews and officials with the select agent program declined to provide additional information. The USDA said in a statement Friday that “all of the information is protected under the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002.”

Such secrecy is a barrier to improving lab safety

Gronvall notes that even with redundant systems in high-security labs, there have been lab incidents resulting in the spread of disease to people and animals outside the labs.

She said a lab accident is considered by many scientists to be the most likely source of the re-emergence in 1977 of an H1N1 flu strain that had disappeared in 1957 because the genetic makeup of the strain hadn't changed as it should have over those decades. A 2009 article in the New England Journal of Medicine noted the 1977 strain was so similar to the one that disappeared that it suggests it had been “preserved” and that the re-emergence was “probably an accidental release from a laboratory source.”

In 2012, CDC staff published an article in the journal Applied Biosafety on select agent theft, loss and releases from 2004 through 2010, documenting 727 reported incidents, 11 lab-acquired infections and one loss of a specimen in transit among more than 3,400 approved shipments.

The article noted that the number of reports received by CDC likely underestimates the true number of suspected losses and releases.

Indeed, there have been many accidents involving germ research. For example, the New York Times [noted](#) in 2005:

In 2002, the discovery of lethal anthrax outside a high-security laboratory at the military's premier biodefense laboratory, the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick in Maryland, led to sampling throughout the institute.

And the Los Angeles Times [reported](#) in 1988:

The Senate report noted that accidents have occurred in the handling of potentially deadly biological material. Vials of biological warfare agents have been misplaced or spilled, it said, employees have been exposed to deadly toxins and a fire once broke out in the high-containment laboratory of the Army's leading germ warfare facility at Ft. Detrick, Md.

Researchers are creating some very dangerous bugs. The Frederick News Post – an excellent local newspaper for the community surrounding the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases at Fort Detrick – [reported](#) in 2010 that the facility would eventually aerosolize Ebola:

Ludwig said researchers at the facility will likely start out working on vaccines for filoviruses such as Ebola and Marburg, as well as new anthrax vaccines.

The facility will have the capability to produce viruses in aerosolized form that would simulate a potential biological attack on the test animals. Ludwig said aerosol is the means of exposure researchers are most concerned with given its implications to battlefield and homeland defense.

A University of Wisconsin-Madison scientist has [re-created the 1918 Spanish flu](#) in the lab. The Guardian [noted](#) in June:

In [an article](#) published last month, [Marc Lipsitch, professor of epidemiology at Harvard School of Public Health] argued that experiments like Kawaoka's could unleash a catastrophic pandemic if a virus escaped or was intentionally released from a high-security laboratory.

Many of the groups that create dangerous viruses to understand their workings are funded by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH). Lord May [the former president of the Royal Society and one time chief science adviser to the UK government] said he suspected the NIH supported the work because officials there were "incompetent" and believed the justifications that scientists told them. "This is work that shouldn't be done. It's as simple as that," he said.

The study identifies particular mutations that made the virus spread so easily. But that is not much use for surveillance, said Lipsitch, because there are scores of other mutations that could have the same effect.

[Simon Wain-Hobson](#), a virologist at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, said he feared that governments and funding bodies would only take the risks seriously once an accident had happened. "It's madness, folly. It shows profound lack of respect for the collective decision-making process we've always shown in fighting infections. If society, the intelligent layperson, understood what was going on, they would say 'What the F are you doing?'"

Obama Now Claims that He's Shutting Down Domestic Germ Program

The New York Times [reported](#) last week that President Obama is so concerned about these accidental releases that he's clamping down on germ research:

Prompted by controversy over dangerous research and recent laboratory accidents, the White House announced Friday that it would temporarily halt all new funding for experiments that seek to study certain infectious agents by making them more dangerous.

It also encouraged scientists involved in such research on the influenza, SARS and MERS viruses to voluntarily pause their work while its risks were reassessed.

The [announcement](#), which was made by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy and the [Department of Health and Human Services](#), did not say how long the moratorium would last. It said a “deliberative process to assess the potential risks and benefits” would begin this month and stretch at least into next year.

The move appeared to be a sudden change of heart by the Obama administration, which [last month issued regulations](#) calling for more stringent federal oversight of such research and requiring scientists and universities to disclose that their work might be risky, rather than expecting federal agencies to notice.

The moratorium is only on research on influenza virus and the coronaviruses that cause SARS and MERS.

The debate over the wisdom of “gain of function” research [erupted in 2011](#) when the labs of Ron Fouchier of Erasmus University in the Netherlands, and Yoshihiro Kawaoka of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, separately announced that they had succeeded in making the lethal H5N1 avian flu easily transmissible between ferrets, which are a model for human susceptibility to flu.

The debate [heated up further this year](#) when the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) admitted it had suffered laboratory accidents that exposed dozens of workers to anthrax and shipped deadly avian flu virus to another federal lab that had asked for a more benign flu strain.

The White House said the moratorium decision had been made “following recent biosafety incidents at federal research facilities.”

Many scientists were furious that such work had been permitted and even supported with American tax dollars. But others argued that it was necessary to learn which genetic mutations make viruses more dangerous. If those mutations began appearing naturally as the viruses circulated in animals and people, warnings could be issued and vaccines designed, they said.

Richard H. Ebright, a molecular biologist and bioweapons expert at Rutgers University, argued that the long history of accidental releases of infectious agents from research labs made such work extremely risky and unwise to perform in the first place.

Germes Abroad

The U.S. conducts germ research worldwide. As the Los Angeles Times [pointed out](#) in the 1988 article:

The Army conducts or contracts for germ warfare work at 120 sites worldwide

The National Journal's Global Security Newswire [reported](#) in 2011 that such sites include bioweapon germs such as Anthrax and Ebola in Africa:

The Obama administration has requested \$260 million in fiscal 2012 funding to bolster protective measures at African research sites that house lethal disease agents, the Examiner reported on Sunday (see [GSN](#), April 14).

The Defense Department funding would be used to safeguard against extremist infiltration facilities in Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere that hold potential biological-weapon agents such as anthrax, Ebola and Rift Valley fever.

The heads of germ research for the Russian and South African governments both say that they intentionally created more lethal forms of deadly germs such as Ebola.

Specifically, the former head of Russia's biological weapons program [told](#) PBS:

In the 70s and beginning of 80s the Soviet Union started developing new biological weapons—Marburg infection biological weapon, Ebola infection biological weapon, Machupo infection, [or] Bolivian hemorrhagic biological weapon, and some others.

The head of South Africa's Apartheid-era biological weapons program also worked on weaponizing Ebola. The New Yorker [noted](#) in 2011:

Dr. Wouter Basson, and the various apartheid-era clandestine weapons programs he oversaw as leader of Project Coast...

South Africans call him Dr. Death. He is regularly compared by the local press, never very persuasively, to Josef Mengele. . .

There were revelations of research into a race-specific bacterial weapon; a project to find ways to sterilize the country's black population

Basson's scientists were working with anthrax, cholera, salmonella, botulinum, thallium, E. coli, ricin, organophosphates, necrotizing fasciitis, hepatitis A, and H.I.V., as well as nerve gases (Sarin, VX) and the Ebola, Marburg, and Rift Valley hemorrhagic-fever viruses. They were producing crude toxins (and some strange delivery systems) for use by the military and police, and they were genetically engineering extremely dangerous new organisms—creating, that is, biological weapons.

And see [this](#).

Dr. Basson alleges that the UK and U.S. helped South Africa with its biowarfare research:

The U.S. has - in the past - intentionally deployed germ warfare abroad. For example, the Senate's Church Committee [found](#) that the CIA decided to bump off the heads of Congo and

Cuba using lethal germs. And the United States [sold anthrax to Saddam Hussein](#) in 1985, for the express purpose of using it against Iran. (CIA files also prove that the U.S. supported Saddam Hussein's [use of chemical weapons against Iran](#).)

Top Bioweapons Expert Speaks Out on Ebola

Washington's Blog spoke with one of America's leading experts on the dangers of research into deadly germs, Dr. Francis Boyle.

Dr. Boyle wrote the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989, the American implementing legislation for the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention.

Dr. Boyle served on the Board of Directors of Amnesty International (1988-1992), and is a professor of international law at the University of Illinois, Champaign.

WASHINGTON'S BLOG: You said recently that laboratories in West Africa run by the Centers for Disease Control and Tulane University are doing bioweapons research. What documentary evidence do you have of that?

You mentioned that a map produced by the CDC shows where the laboratories are located on the West Coast of Africa?

DR. FRANCIS BOYLE: Yes. They've got one in Monrovia [the capital of Ebola-stricken Liberia] ... one in Kenema, Sierra Leone [the third largest city in the Ebola-hotzone nation], which was shut down this summer because the government there believed that it was the Tulane vaccines which had set this whole thing off.

And then they have another one in Guinea, where the first case [of Ebola] was reported.

All of these are labs which do this offensive/defensive biowarfare work.

And Fort Detrick's USAMRIID [the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases] has also been over there. So it's clear what's been going on there.

CDC has a long history of doing biowarfare work. I have them doing biowarfare work for the Pentagon in Sierra Leone as early 1988.

WASHINGTON'S BLOG: And how do you know that? Have you seen official documents?

DR. FRANCIS BOYLE: An official government document: the Biological Defense Research Program, May 1988. I analyzed it in my book, [Biowarfare and Terrorism](#).

It's clear that [the U.S. bioweapons researchers] were using Liberia to try to circumvent the Biological Weapons Convention. And CDC - for years - has been up to its eyeballs in biowarfare work.

They always try to justify the development of offensive biological weapons by claiming it's being done for "defensive" purposes. That's just a lie ... and it's always been a lie.

It's been the case on Ebola and just about every other biowarfare agent you can think of.

WASHINGTON'S BLOG: Does that type of research violate the Biological Weapons Convention?

DR. FRANCIS BOYLE: Well, of course! It also violates the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act [which Boyle drafted], which was passed unanimously by both houses of the United States Congress and signed into law by President Bush, Senior.

That Act creates life in prison for this type of “Dr. Menegle” type work.

WASHINGTON’S BLOG: And Obama recently said – as quoted in the New York Times article – that he’s “curtailing” this type of defensive research, or putting it on hold.

Do you believe him?

DR. FRANCIS BOYLE: That’s the smoking gun, right there. Read that article [the New York Times article quoted above, which notes “a sudden change of heart by the Obama administration” about labs creating ever-deadlier versions of germs which are already lethal].

The reason they’ve stopped it is to cover themselves, I think, because they know that this type of work was behind the outbreak of the [Ebola] pandemic in West Africa.

But that’s an admission right there, *de facto*.

Dr. Boyle made it clear that he is *not* suggesting – as some others are – that Ebola was *intentionally* released into the African population. He says he has seen no evidence of intentional release. He’s speaking about an *accidental* release of germs from a biowarfare research lab.

He’s convinced, in fact, that this Ebola epidemic in Africa started with the release from a U.S. bioweapons lab in West Africa. One of the reasons for his conviction that the outbreak started with the release from a bioweapon lab is that this Ebola strain [seems to be much worse](#) than those previously seen in the wild.

As Dr. Boyle told us:

It seems to me that [the Ebola epidemic in West Africa] has U.S. biowarfare programs written all over it.

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