Don't panic over apparent ricin letters

By ACSH Staff — April 17, 2013

The poison ricin is made from castor beans

Just days after two bombs in Boston killed three people and injured 170 more, letters that may or may not have been poisoned with ricin addressed to President Obama and a Mississippi senator have been intercepted by authorities.

But don't panic yet. The rapid test that authorities used in this case frequently causes false alarms. A second test that uses culture cells and takes 48 hours to perform is needed to confirm the presence of the toxin, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The letters were postmarked April 8 from Memphis, Tenn., before the marathon, and both said: To see a wrong and not expose it, is to become a silent partner to its continuance. Both are signed, I am KC and I approve this message, the Associated Press reported.

Ricin can be aerosolized, but doing so would require significant expertise. Making ricin into something that can be released from an envelope into the air, be the right size to be inhaled and stick in the lungs is a lot to get right, especially if you are not a bioterrorism specialist and know how to do that. It's not something you can do in your garage, says Dr. Patricia Quinlisk, the medical director of the Iowa Public Health Department.

Of course, that doesn't mean it can't be deadly. It's so potent that if you get a little on your fingers, that's it, the stuff is so poisonous, says ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom.

But that makes it a weapon more for small-scale attacks rather than creating mass casualties. In fact, the only people confirmed killed by ricin have been through injections, including that in 1978 of a Bulgarian dissident who was killed by a ricin-tipped umbrella.

The post Don't panic over apparent ricin letters appeared first on Health & Science Dispatch.