

Not Dead Yet: Military Labs Mislabelling Killer Pathogens

By ACSH Staff — September 17, 2015



There are lots of folks out there who want to kill Americans take ISIS for example. But maybe those enemies should relax, because considering the recent snafus at military and other government labs, we may do the job for them.

OK, that's a bit of an overstatement. But in light of recent [developments](#) ^[1] with dangerous pathogens at these labs, it's not completely insane. Just the latest case of mishandling of dangerous bugs surfaced last week at the Army's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center in Maryland and it involved *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that [causes](#) ^[2] plague.

This bacterium can kill by several routes: bubonic plague causes swollen lymph nodes or buboes; pneumonic plague which results from the infection spreading to the lungs; and septicemic plague in which the bacteria are in the blood and can result in dying skin and other tissues. *Y. pestis* can be killed by antibiotics that is, when the infection is caught early enough. It's thought to be the source of the Black Death that decimated the population of Europe in the 14th century.

The problem of mishandled plague bacteria at Edgewood was discovered by the CDC during a review of safety practices. Officials discovered that samples labeled as killed (and thus noninfective) actually contained live bacteria. Samples of this, and other potentially deadly pathogens, are shipped to other facilities that do research related to bioterrorism. Obviously, if the receiving labs believe the bacteria are dead, they will not take all the safety precautions required for live pathogens.

This is not the only case of military mishandling of pathogens. Indeed, the Army Secretary ordered a research [moratorium](#) ^[3] earlier this month after anthrax bacteria were found on the floors of army labs in Utah. This lab, the Dugway Proving Ground, had shipped live anthrax bacteria, labeled as "killed" to multiple research labs around the country.

These mistakes are bad enough, but at least there's a remedy antibiotics for deadly bacteria. But these labs also deal in deadly viruses, such as Ebola and smallpox, and viral diseases can't be cured by antibiotics. And even the CDC itself has been guilty of mishandling such dangerous pathogens as ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom described [here](#) ^[4].

What to do? Well, all we can really do is keep our fingers crossed that the safety review will result in much tighter control of such pathogens. Obviously, our military and the government in general

needs to improve safety regulations and *enforce* them to prevent an accidental outbreak of some deadly disease.

Maybe we should cross our toes as well.

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Links

[1] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/10/bioterrorism-military-labs-specimens-mistakes-plague-encephalitis/71888694/>

[2] <http://www.cdc.gov/plague/transmission/index.html>

[3] <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/09/03/pentagon-announce-moratorium-military-labs/71647118/>

[4] <http://acsh.org/2014/07/smallpox-big-box-locks/>