

GERMS GONE WILD:

TOP TEN REASONS TO WORRY ABOUT BIODEFENSE

The expansion of biodefense after the 2001 anthrax attacks has greatly increased the likelihood of similar insider attacks (what the FBI says occurred in 2001) and of accidents. Here's why:

(1) Huge proliferation of new high-risk labs: Over 1100 new labs (a sevenfold increase) in the US since 2001—possibly hundreds more.

(2) Who's keeping track?--No one in the government, the Government Accountability Office said in 2007.

(3) Lots of new, inexperienced researchers: 15,000 plus—most of them never having worked with bioweapons agents before 2001.

(4) Safety regulators missing in action: Many labs not regulated at all; the rest get minimal attention. The labs are essentially regulating themselves, the GAO said in 2007.

(5) Risky research: Breeding antibiotic resistance into existing bioweapons agents; recreating the 1918 flu; creating deadly forms of the bird flu that spread easily between people.

(6) Accidents happen, regularly: Technologies fail; people ignore routine safety procedures; infected researchers typically go undiagnosed for weeks.

(7) Secrecy/deception: The labs and government agencies which regulate them keep accidents from the public, spin problems when they occur, and blandly portray labs as having no risks.

(8) Conflict of interest. The government agencies involved in regulation all operate dangerous labs themselves.

(9) Money breeds prevarication: The sevenfold increase in biodefense funding after 2001 gave birth to a “biodefense complex” determined to keep the funding levels high, and therefore devoted to hyping the fears of bioterrorism.

(10) Waste—“a dog chasing its tail”: Over \$60 billion spent since 2001 on repetitive research--trying futilely to create magic bullets against a score of bioweapons agents; creating new agents that then require new “countermeasures”; draining money from important public health research and our ailing public health infrastructure.