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TERRORISM & SECURITY

Bioterror staffing called inadequate



Nightly News

Report says government can't compete for experts

July 7 — A major bioterrorism attack would likely overwhelm government scientists assigned to analyze biological weapons, the report says. NBC's Pete Williams reports.

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MSNBC AND NBC NEWS

July 7 — The government is so short of experts that it would be overwhelmed by a biological terror attack, and the problem will only get worse as scores of aging government specialists retire within the next five years, according to a study to be released Tuesday.

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THE REPORT is at least the third in just the past month to warn that the United States could be at the mercy of domestic terrorists.

The Council on Foreign Relations found last week that local agencies were desperately underfunded to mount even a “minimum effective response” to a catastrophic terrorist attack involving chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or conventional weapons. Another study, by the Trust for America’s Health, found that the the nation’s public health laboratories were “dangerously unprepared” for a chemical attack.

The new study, by the non-partisan Partnership for Public Service, which lobbies to attract qualified people to federal service, charges that the federal government does not have enough specialists to adequately examine biological weapons.

“We have too few experts; they cannot keep pace with preparatory requirements,” it says.

LESSONS OF THE ANTHRAX LETTERS

The report draws alarming conclusions from the federal government’s response to the series of anthrax-laced letters that were mailed to government and news media offices in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

The anthrax attacks were a “small scale challenge,” the report says, but they still severely “overburdened” federal resources, and five people died. “A large scale attack would overwhelm them,” it warns.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention committed as much as a quarter of its entire workforce to the attacks, according to the report, which quotes Dr. Julie Gerberding, the CDC’s director, as

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saying the agency would have been stretched “beyond capacity” had they been any more widespread.

“Agency employees were working around the clock, sometimes sleeping on mattresses placed in laboratories, to complete the work needed to respond to both the real cases, as well as the thousands of hoaxes,” the report says.

As a result, “laboratories operating at capacity could not address any other public health issue,” it says. Moreover, the agency had no one available to communicate effectively with local officials and doctors about effective treatments.

Even now, almost two years later, the CDC “has not conducted comprehensive follow-ups or physical examinations” of victims who survived exposure to the anthrax-laced letters, the report says.

The federal response to the anthrax attacks “signaled our vulnerability to larger-scale, multiple or phased bioterrorist attacks,” the report warns. “... The government lost several rounds in [the] battle for confidence during the anthrax threat.”

Defending the homefront

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Nightly News

The threat of bioterrorism

NBC's Robert Bazell reports on the threat of biological terror in the U.S.

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‘HIRING PROCESS ... IS BROKEN’

At the heart of the problem is the government hiring and promotion process, which is too inflexible to attract and keep the best talent, according to the report, which examined the CDC, the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases and three other federal agencies.

Even after a series of high-profile terrorist drills, the most recent last month in Chicago and Seattle, the government has no reliable count of how many experts it has on hand now and has no way to assess how many it would need in the event of an attack, the study found.

Many scientists are bolting the government for better-paying jobs at universities and in the private sector, it says. But of more immediate concern is the

‘We’re looking at, across the board, nearly half of the biodefense workforce ... being eligible to retire in the next five years.’

— **MAX STIER**
Partnership for Public Service

fact that many others are bumping up on retirement age, a double whammy that has left government health agencies in a “workforce crisis.”

“We’re looking at, across the board, nearly half of the biodefense workforce ... being eligible to retire in the next five years,” Max Stier, president of the Partnership for Public Service, said in an interview with NBC News.

The report recites a list of shortcomings in federal science recruiting, among them:

- Pay regulations based on longevity, not merit, which drive the most talented scientists to the private sector. In biodefense-related jobs at the Agriculture Department, for example, starting salaries for highly recruited physicians can run 45 percent lower than for similar jobs in the business world.

- Laws and regulations that limit government biodefense hiring to U.S. citizens. As many as 25 percent of graduates of U.S. medical schools are foreign nationals, an enormous talent pool that the government cannot tap.

- A work environment that is “not supportive of high performers and innovators.” The study said that “in every interview we completed with members of the federal biodefense workforce” — particularly those on the “front lines” — employees complained that the federal system was “antithetical to the foundation of merit found in other sectors.”

“The federal government has a hiring process which is, simply put, broken,” Stier said. “It takes too long. It’s too cumbersome, and it’s non-transparent, and the end result is that the federal government is unable to compete for the talent it needs to both prepare for and respond to the bioterrorist threat.”

‘EVERYTHING HUMANLY POSSIBLE’

In an interview with NBC News, Jerome Hauer, the assistant secretary of health and human services for public health emergency preparedness, acknowledged that the government needed more scientists but insisted that “significant gains have been made in preparing this country for dealing with bioterrorism.”

Mankind's weapons of terror



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“We recognized early on that there was a great need to enhance the number of specialists, including researchers, epidemiologists and inspectors,” Hauer said.

“We are doing everything humanly possible to try and

continue to recruit top-quality scientists. ... We've put over \$9 billion out to help rebuild this infrastructure, not just for bioterrorism but for any public health emergency.”

But the Partnership for Public Service study faults federal officials for having no “government-wide planning effort that develops a coordinated recruitment plan.”

“Although federal biodefense staffing levels have increased in recent years, the workforce may not include the right employees — in number or in skills — needed to respond to a bioterrorist attack,” it warns.

Stier praised the scientists the government does have, calling them “very qualified, very capable people that would respond in an admirable fashion.”

But “they need help,” he said. “They need more resources, and they need preparation for the future in order for us to be able to be safe as a nation.”

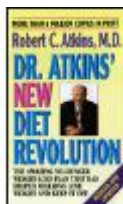
By Pete Williams of NBC News in Washington and Alex Johnson of MSNBC.com.

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