PRESIDENT'S PAGE

Biological agents (infectious agents and toxins) are hot stuff with the media in today's world. Top headlines for the past three months go to Iraq's deadly arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. Where are they manufactured? Where are they stored? How do we destroy them? In the last weeks of February the arrest of two people, one with links to a right wing racial group, for possessing large amounts of anthrax, elbowed its way onto the front page of newspapers and magazines and into one minute sound bites on the news shows. On one news show retired Senator Bill Bradley talked about the vulnerability of our society to biological terrorists and illustrated this vulnerability by referring to the possibility of crop duster airplanes spraying anthrax over New York City. A year ago retired Senator Sam Nunn also discussed on national TV our vulnerability to biological terrorists. The Discovery Channel's SpyTec presented in detail the murder of a Bulgarian patriot by the Bulgarian KGB using an umbrella gun that injected an iridium pellet containing the toxin ricin into the leg of the patriot.

However, the role of biological agents in threatening our food, water and air also regularly makes it way into the news media. In the past several weeks special feature TV shows addressed bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and the Hong Kong flu.

Biological agents are also a favorite topic of book authors. Just wander over to the science section of your local bookstore. About 2% of the books are on infectious agents. These books include The Hot Zone (Richard Preston), Virus Hunter (C.J. Peters), The Coming Plague (Laurie Garrett), Level 4 (Joseph McCormick and Susan Fisher-Hoch), Virus X (Frank Ryan), Deadly Feasts (Richard Rhodes), Emerging Viruses (Leonard Horowitz). You might also find The Forgotten Plague (Frank Ryan), The Dancing Matrix (Robin Marantz Heydig) and Emerging Viruses (Stephen S. Morse).

If you need some riveting stories on the use biological agents to kill, harm or terrorize large numbers of people wander over to the fiction book section. You might be able to feel the terror after reading such books as Outbreak and Contagion (Robin Cook), Carrier (Peter Lynch), The Stand (Stephen King), The Cobra Event (Richard Preston), Executive Orders (Tom Clancy), The Pandemic (Pierre Oullette), The Eleventh Plague (John S. Mann and John Baldwin), and Code Red (Nancy Fisher).

If you were to wander over to the magazine section you would find Headlined on the front cover of Newsweek (February 23) the Flu Hunters. On February 8, Parade magazine headlined on its front cover “The Virus Hunters.” Just three months ago (November 24, 1997), Newsweek, Time, and US News and World Report all had stories related to microbes (two on biological warfare and one on antibiotic resistance) on their front cover.

As the media continue to sensitize the public to biological agents the requirements for biological laboratories to reassure the public that they have qualified workers in appropriately designed facilities under safe work conditions will grow. In today's climate of biological terrorism the laboratories also have to assure the public that they are performing legitimate work that is in the public interest and that they can maintain their biological agents securely so that they cannot end up in the wrong hands. Unsafe laboratories are newsworthy. Laboratory acquired infections are newsworthy. Nobody wants an unsafe laboratory in their backyard. Nobody wants an unauthorized biological laboratory in their backyard. The best assurances that a laboratory can provide the public is to demonstrate that they have a complete biological safety program managed by trained biological safety professionals that is in accordance with all federal and state regulations and guidelines. ABSA needs to become recognized as a national resource and the national leader for information, training, education and certification in all biosafety program elements.