PRESIDENT’S PAGE

During my career as a microbiologist in diagnostic and research laboratories I have worked with a wide variety of biologic agents (infectious agents and their toxins) of humans and livestock. I tried to work safely with these agents to protect myself, my co-workers and the community. At the end of my work period my agents went into the incubator, the refrigerator and the freezer, which were left unlocked. I put the name of the agent on the sample container. When I went to lunch I left the lab door unlocked. The thought that anyone, even a lab co-worker, would “steal” one of these agents to use it maliciously was present only in the deepest recesses of my mind.

There is now widespread public recognition that the biological agents that we work with in our laboratories have potential use as weapons to sicken or kill our fellow employees as well as large numbers of people. “Weapons of mass destruction” and “bioterrorism” are common terms seen or heard daily emanating from the mass media. In Nelson DeMille’s 1996 fictional best seller Plum Island the plot suggests that the two murdered Plum Island scientists had stolen infectious agents from the Plum Island high containment laboratory. In Richard Preston’s 1997 fictional best seller “The Cobra Event” a scientist steals a weaponized strain of baculovirus from an industrial laboratory for use as a biological weapon. Although these stories are fiction, they are not far from reality. In Texas in 1996 an outbreak of Shigella dysenteriae type 2 among laboratory staff was traced to the laboratory’s stock culture of this agent. It was suspected that this stock culture was used to deliberately contaminate pastries eaten by the laboratory staff (Kolavic et al, JAMA 1997; 278:396-398).

The CDC/NIH guidelines “Biosafety in Microbiological and Biomedical Laboratories” provide little in the way of guidelines for securing biological agents. Our new federal regulation, 42 CFR Part 72.6 “Additional Requirements for Facilities Receiving or Transferring Select Agents” requires the Select Agents to be stored securely, but provides little in the way of details.

For the present we need to rely on our common sense. At the very least biological agents need to be securely stored under lock and key. Laboratory access needs to be carefully restricted. Stock cultures need to be coded. Security needs to be added to the inspection checklist for biological safety. Illness of laboratory staff needs to be carefully investigated to eliminate the possibility of malicious use of laboratory agents. Finally, the biological safety community needs to develop and publish guidelines for secure storage and use of biological agents.

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