



Ricin Attacks Recall U.S. Vulnerabilities in Chemical Terrorism Preparedness

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WASHINGTON, February 4, 2004 — This week's discovery of ricin in U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's office demonstrates the continued threats the nation faces from biological and chemical terrorist attacks and the importance of a responsive and integrated public health defense system to combat these threats.

However, a report issued by Trust for America's Health (TFAH) in June 2003 found that state public health laboratories are "dangerously unprepared" to fulfill their roles as first responders charged with identifying chemical agents used in an attack. The study examined the labs' abilities to respond to a hypothetical chemical weapon assault, including an incident involving a toxin like ricin. Additionally, a December 2003 report from TFAH demonstrated that despite a \$2 billion investment, federal bioterrorism preparedness funding has made states only "modestly better prepared" to respond to health emergencies.

"The ricin outbreak is just the latest in a series of wake-up calls. Our nation is vulnerable to biological and chemical threats, from terrorists or in the form of natural terror, like the bird flu and Mad Cow disease," said Shelley A. Hearne, Dr. P.H., executive director of TFAH. "Homeland security requires that we do more to better prepare a responsive, all-hazards public health defense that can protect Americans in the most effective way possible."

TFAH's June 2003 report, "Public Health Laboratories: Unprepared and Overwhelmed," examined the capabilities of state public health laboratories, a crucial component of our defense and response system, and found that a majority of labs are in need of modernization and stabilized funding support. Labs are responsible for identifying the chemical weapons used in an attack, which then drives the critical treatment, containment, and clean up decisions. The report found gaps in planning, coordination, equipment, training, safeguards, workforce, and environmental testing capacity for chemical agents.

TFAH's December 2003 report, "Ready or Not? Protecting the Public's Health in the Age of Bioterrorism," examined 10 key indicators in the general categories of funding, public health infrastructure, and "double duty" indicators that reflected the status of states' traditional public health programs. The findings showed that while progress had been made in most states to improve communications, planning, and some elements of the public health infrastructure; funding cuts at the state level, workforce shortages, and

poor interagency collaboration led to most states earning positive marks for less than half of the indicators tested.

To ensure that preparedness measures are in place to respond to the full spectrum of health threats, Trust for America's Health recommends a new "all hazards" approach to public health, which would ensure that federal, state, and local health agencies are battle-ready for all hazards, not just bioterrorism or the disease currently garnering headlines.

This approach would focus on strengthening the fundamentals of our public health defenses, including laboratory capabilities and communications and response procedures. TFAH also recommends that the White House, in consultation with Congress, convene a national summit on the future of public health to develop a cohesive and proactive approach to public health protection.

TFAH's reports and related public health materials are available at:

www.healthyamericans.org

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Trust for America's Health is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority.