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FEBRUARY 7, 2009

U.S. Army Lab Freezes Research on Dangerous Pathogens

The U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases ([USAMRIID](#)) has suspended research activities involving biological select agents and toxins. Army officials took the step on Friday after discovering apparent problems with the system of accounting for high-risk microbes and biomaterials at the Fort Detrick, Maryland, facility.

The lab has been under intense scrutiny since August, when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) [named](#) former USAMRIID researcher Bruce Ivins as the perpetrator of the 2001 anthrax letter attacks. Although the case never went to trial because of Ivins's suicide on 29 July 2008, FBI officials have [claimed](#) that the evidence against him is indisputable and that he carried out the mailings using anthrax stolen from a flask at USAMRIID.

Officials have begun a complete inventory of all select agents and toxins at the facility. All experiments using select agents will remain suspended until the accounting is finished, which could take several weeks. Several USAMRIID researchers have been grumbling about the decision, which seems to have caught them by surprise, according to a government official not connected to the lab.

The decision was announced by institute commander Col. John Skvorak in a 4 February memo to employees. The memo, which *ScienceInsider* has obtained, says the standard of accountability that USAMRIID had been applying to its select agents and toxins was not in line with the standard required by the Army and the Department of Defense. USAMRIID officials believed that a satisfactory accounting involved finding all the items listed on its database; the Army and DOD wanted the converse—that is, all select agents and toxins needed to be matched to the database.

According to the memo, any materials found without a corresponding record in the database must be reported to the Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. "I believe that the probability that there are additional vials of BSAT [biological select agents and toxins] not captured in our ... database is high," Skvorak wrote.

A former USAMRIID scientist told *ScienceInsider* that in the past, inventorying of biological materials at the institute routinely turned up items that had not been listed on the database before. Those items would be added to the database without shutting down research.

—Yudhijit Bhattacharjee

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3 Comments

By robert on [February 9, 2009 9:42 AM](#)

I would have thought after the Ivins "suicide" everything would be peachy

By escapefromobamastan on [February 9, 2009 1:39 AM](#)

Yeah. Look at Philip Zack's success at illegally entering and taking anthrax from Ft. Deitrich before the Anthrax Attacks in the U.S.

<http://theuglytruth.wordpress.com/2008/08/04/%E2%80%98suicide%E2%80%99-of-anthrax-scientist-another-mossad-frame-up/>

By Eric Vaughan on [February 8, 2009 4:48 PM](#)

Maybe it's just me, but ever since an explosion happened outside Canadian Forces Base Downsview (Military R&D) on August 10, 2008, the damnest things have been happening in this realm of science.

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