

Safety problems at US germ labs acknowledged

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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Thomas Frieden testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, July 16, 2014, before the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee about an incident last month at a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lab that handles bioterrorism agents. (AP Photo/Lauren Victoria Burke)

(AP)—The director of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledged Wednesday that systemic safety problems have for years plagued federal public health laboratories that handle dangerous germs such as anthrax and bird flu.

Testifying at a congressional hearing in Washington, Dr. Tom Frieden said the agency had long thought of the lapses as unrelated accidents. But two particularly serious mistakes this year caused officials to re-examine lab safety.

"In hindsight, we realize we missed a crucial pattern" of a lax safety culture, Frieden told lawmakers on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which was seeking details about a series of lapses reported over the last decade at labs run by the agency.

One incident happened last month at a lab that handles bioterrorism agents. The lab was supposed to completely kill [anthrax](#) samples before sending them to two other CDC labs that had fewer safeguards for containing dangerous germs. But the higher-security lab did not completely sterilize the bacteria.

Dozens of CDC workers were potentially exposed to anthrax, but no one got sick. An internal investigation released last week found serious safety lapses, including use of unapproved sterilization techniques and use of a potent type of anthrax in an experiment that did not require that germ.

In the other incident, relatively harmless [bird flu](#) virus was accidentally contaminated with a much deadlier strain. The contaminated virus was then sent to a lab run by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The contamination was discovered in May, but the incident was not reported to CDC's top management until last week, Frieden said.

No one has been reported infected. But Frieden has said the second

incident was particularly worrisome because flu, unlike anthrax, is a germ that can potentially spread easily from person to person.

CDC officials are still not sure how the contamination occurred, Frieden said.

Lawmakers seemed most alarmed about repeated incidents in which CDC scientists shipped to other labs germs they thought were benign but were actually potent.

If these kinds of problems exist at the CDC, they probably also happen at the more than 1,000 other high-level U.S. labs that handle dangerous biological agents, said Richard Ebright, a biochemist at Rutgers University.

The number of labs should be whittled down to 50, which would allow more focus and control over this kind of work, he said.

An official with the General Accountability Office did not go that far. But she said there's an urgent need for better oversight of the laboratories.

There's been no comprehensive evaluation of how many of the labs are necessary and whether adequate planning is in place to make sure they stay up-to-date, adequately staffed and safe, said Nancy Kingsbury, the GAO official.

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