

Probe of military labs expands to plague, encephalitis

September 10 2015, by Lolita C. Baldor And Robert Burns

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expanding its investigation into possible mishandling and improper shipment by Defense Department laboratories of organisms that cause deadly diseases, including plague and encephalitis, U.S. officials said Thursday.

Concerns about the handling of those samples led the Army to announce a moratorium on production, shipping and handling of toxins at nine labs last week. But officials did not acknowledge until Thursday that plague and encephalitis samples were involved.

When asked why the Pentagon didn't disclose the new concerns about plague and encephalitis last week, Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook said that officials were trying to be as forthcoming as possible "without alarming the public." He added that officials are waiting for the results of the investigation.

In a statement Thursday, the CDC said it was investigating four Defense Department labs as a result of spot checks at two facilities. The Army said the spot checks were at Edgewood Chemical and Biological Center and U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, both in Maryland.

"CDC has identified a number of transfers of concern involving multiple organisms," the CDC said, adding that the investigation is trying to determine whether there are record-keeping or quality-management problems or if there were shipment violations involving the toxins. "At

this time, there is nothing to suggest risk to the health of workers or the general public."

According to the CDC, most of the transfers were between Defense Department facilities.

In a separate statement, the Army said the CDC raised questions about a particular organism that causes plague—known as *Yersinia pestis*—during an Aug. 17 inspection at Edgewood. The CDC questioned whether the organism was fully virulent, even though it was stored in an area designated for non-fully virulent materials.

Cook said he believes that a sample was in a freezer in a controlled setting but outside a containment area, and the CDC questioned whether it was an infectious form of plague.

The Army said that initial tests suggest the strain was not fully virulent, and the CDC is working to verify those tests.

"There is no indication that anyone has been exposed from handling this strain and no one has become sick," the Army said, adding that the sample was immediately contained and properly stored.

In addition, the Army said the CDC questioned the labeling of a strain of equine encephalitis viruses, and whether it was properly handled.

When asked about the encephalitis sample, Cook said: "My understanding is that the way this first came to light was a CDC spot inspection of this facility and that the CDC looked at the freezer area where this sample was being held and then checked against the inventory logbook and raised questions about whether or not what was listed in the inventory as noninfectious was, in fact, noninfectious, and that started this testing process."

The Army said it believes the materials were properly handled and that no researchers were exposed.

"These developments directly contributed to the Army's decision to issue last week's safety review and the extension of the existing moratorium on the handling of select agents and toxins," the Army said.

The questions about plague and encephalitis samples were first reported by USA Today.

Last week, Army Secretary John McHugh ordered a safety stand-down and directed a broad review at nine department labs involved in the production, shipment or handling of biological toxins and suspended operations involving critical toxins at four of the labs.

His order expanded the initial moratorium announced in July, which suspended activities with anthrax. The announcement last week noted that the stand-down came after the CDC found problems with record-keeping at Edgewood and USAMRIID. But it did not reveal that plague and encephalitis samples were involved and that those concerns, in part, triggered the stand-down.

Cook said he believes that Ebola is not among the toxins involved in the investigation.

The four labs affected by the moratorium are: Dugway Proving Ground Life Sciences Test Facility in Utah and three facilities in Maryland: Edgewood Chemical and Biological Center, U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, and the Naval Medical Research Center.

The nine facilities ordered to conduct safety reviews, some of which include the labs undergoing a moratorium, are Dugway Proving Ground,

Utah; 711th Personnel Wing, Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio; Edgewood Chemical Biological Center, Maryland; U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit 3 in Egypt; U.S. Naval Medical Research Unit 6 in Peru; U.S. Army Soldier Systems Center in Massachusetts; Naval Medical Research Center, Fort Detrick, Maryland; Naval Surface Warfare Center, Dahlgren, Virginia; U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, Frederick, Maryland.

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