

Should we be concerned about the latest Anthrax Release?



US Army Dugway, Utah Proving Ground

The abrupt news that live anthrax samples had been [shipped](#) from the US Army Dugway proving ground to laboratories in the US, an air base in South Korea and possibly Australia came as a reminder to Americans and the world that biological warfare training exercises might lead to troubling inadvertent releases. Fortunately, 22 military personnel exposed at the south Korean airbase are being treated with the antibiotic Cipro. However, this latest release of a BW agent has caused both the US Army bio-warfare directorate and the CDC to review safety precautions, packaging and procedures for the transmission of possible live anthrax spores and why samples had not been made inert?



picture of microscopic anthrax spores

Source: Reuters

The [BBC reported](#) that the US military has ordered a review of how it handles anthrax after discovering more cases of live samples being accidentally sent to labs:

Live anthrax samples were believed to have been sent to a total of 24 labs, in 11 US states as well as South Korea and Australia, the Pentagon said.

The Pentagon says that there is no known risk to the general public.

Experts in bio-safety have heavily criticized the lapse and called for improved precautions.

Symptoms of anthrax exposure include skin ulcers, nausea, vomiting and fever, and can cause death if untreated.

News of the live shipments first emerged on Wednesday, as the US said it had

accidentally shipped live anthrax spores from Utah to labs in Texas, Maryland, Wisconsin, Delaware, New Jersey, Tennessee, New York, California and Virginia, as well as an air base in South Korea.

Those shipments took place between March 2014 and April 2015, a US official said, according to *Reuters*.

On Friday, the Department of Defense said it had identified “additional inadvertent live anthrax shipments”, including a suspect sample sent to Australia from a batch of anthrax from 2008.

It is not clear when that sample was shipped to Australia.

The military has ordered all of its labs that have previously received inactive anthrax samples to test them. In addition it is advising all labs to cease working with these samples until told otherwise.

Shortly after 9/11, the American public concern over bio-terrorism was raised by the [release](#) of Anthrax in powdered form in letters sent to members of Congress and randomly to private persons. 22 persons were sickened, 5 died, the US Senate building was shut down and inspected. Anthrax exists naturally, but more powerful variants have been [developed](#) synthetically by dual use laboratories in rogue states like Iran, North Korea and Assad’s Syria. Bio-warfare laboratories have been established by Al Qaeda and ISIS has been [rumored](#) to have obtained access to materials in Syria, as well. Remember the arrest in Afghanistan, prosecution and conviction in the US of Brandeis University and MIT trained scientist, “Lady Al Qaeda”, [Aafia Siddiqui](#). There is also evidence that Iran’s terrorist proxy, Hezbollah may have been [transferred](#) BW capabilities and agents by Syria that could be deployed against America’s ally, Israel and globally through major transportation nodes in Europe.



Dr. Jill Bellamy

We asked Dr. Jill Bellamy, noted expert on biological warfare and threat reduction about this latest incident. We have published articles by Dr. Bellamy on Syrian, Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and Iranian [BW programs](#) in both the *NER* and our blog the Iconoclast.

She commented:

Clearly from a bio-safety perspective this is a very serious breach of protocol and

demands a full and transparent investigation. As anyone who works with inactivated anthrax would be routinely vaccinated with AVA, exposure from a clinical perspective is probably not as much of a concern as the general public may believe. Of course if anyone outside military labs the live anthrax was sent to and persons who have not been routinely vaccinated were exposed, this would be concerning. I would worry about the time frame from exposure. It appears from the reports that we are talking about several weeks or months during which the anthrax was shipped. It is probably a good sign that none of the labs has reported a laboratory acquired disease or LAD. If exposure is known Cipro (ciprofloxacin hydrochloride) is given for inhalation anthrax and usually a 60 day course is advised. The lab workers in these labs would surely have all been vaccinated, so how much of a health risk it poses is debatable.

The bio-safety side is more worrying. CDC and a number of other labs have previously had exposures from the accidental handling of live anthrax. There are very stringent regulations in place for the shipping and transport of live agents. It is doubtful there was any risk to public health during the transport as this would be handled by the military. What is more problematic is that the research done at US Army labs and Dugway proving ground are critical to national security. Incidents like this feed an uninformed section in non-proliferation circles who then call for the closing of these labs or hype the danger they pose to the general public. It makes it more difficult to assure the public that such labs are a vital aspect to protecting citizens from BW attacks and ensuring vaccines and therapeutic countermeasures are available and stockpiled in the event of a deliberate attack. Hopefully this is an incident we will learn a great deal from in terms of bio-safety training, protocols and bio-security.