

Activity 5: Responding to A Bioterrorist Attack

Assignment 1: Short In-Class Dilemma

Botulinum toxin has been used as a weapon of bioterrorism during the last 60 years. To the surprise of many Americans, the US established a biowarfare program in the early 1940's at Camp Detrick, Maryland. This program has since been dismantled, largely as a result of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. On April 10, 1972, 108 countries signed a treaty which mandated that they abandon biological weapons research programs designed for offensive attacks. In 2001, however, President Bush declined to ratify the treaty, arguing that it threatened public disclosure of commercial interests in the biotechnology sector. One consequence of this, however, is to create a potential source of bioweapons for terrorists groups.

In recent years, a number of botched terrorists attacks have attempted to release botulinum toxin, but have failed. In April 1990, Aum Shinrikyo, a cult group based in Japan, sent trucks through central Tokyo spraying botulinum toxin. Targets included the U.S. Navy installation at Yokohama and the base at Yokosuka, as well as Narita International Airport. These attacks were unsuccessful, as were two other attempts in subsequent years. In 2001, the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which were followed almost immediately by discovery of letters containing anthrax, spurred U.S. defense programs to tighten security measures. Among the measures taken was the creation of a new Department of Homeland Security.

Instructions

1. Consider the scenario sketched below. You will have 10 minutes to complete the Dilemma Questions in this Assignment. Be prepared to provide your rationale for your responses.
2. You will then spend 15-20 minutes discussing your answers in small groups or with a partner.
3. During the last 20 minutes of class each small group will have 3 minutes to report the consensus from their group. If your class is large, your instructor may choose a few groups to share their conclusions with the class.

Scenario

1. A shadowy organization which has been suspected of bioterrorist activities has sent a threatening letter to the Secretary of Health and Human Services.
2. This letter contains information suggesting that botulinum attack might occur within one month in one of three U.S. cities: San Francisco, New York City or Chicago.
3. The FBI has determined that the threat should be taken seriously and preparations should be made to minimize the effects of the attack.
4. The Department of Homeland Security has raised the Terrorist Advisory level to Orange, indicating a high risk of terrorist attacks.
5. Botulism, if untreated, will kill 80% of those who become infected.
6. A vaccine for botulism exists and military personnel preparing to engage in combat are required to be vaccinated.

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Dilemma Questions

1. If civilian vaccination were available, would you get vaccinated?
2. Should you be forced to receive a vaccination?
3. If mandatory, who should pay for your vaccination?