

Texas A&M Charged with Failure to Report Human Exposure to Biological Agents

By Amit Agarwal

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has indefinitely suspended Texas A&M University's federal research on the most dangerous infectious diseases. The university allegedly failed to report two 2006 incidents of researcher exposure to biological agents.

The Sunshine Project, an Austin-based bioweapons watchdog group, released records indicating that in April 2006 three biodefense researchers were exposed to the weapons agent Q fever. A couple of months earlier, another researcher fell sick after being infected with Brucella while cleaning a room that was used to assess the effects of the bacterium on mice. Sunshine Project organizers obtained the lab's accident report under the state's Public Information Act. Although not usually fatal to humans, both diseases are difficult to cure.

The university reported the Brucella mishap to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention more than a year after it occurred. The Q fever case, however, remains unreported. Federal law requires that such incidents be reported within seven days. The CDC sent a memo to Texas A&M questioning the university on its safety standards and security plan. It threatened to permanently annul A&M's authority to conduct research using "select agents." The memo added that federal officials would visit the campus to assess records and interview researchers.

A&M interim president Eddie Davis said the university would fully cooperate with CDC investigators. Officials at the university agreed they did not follow protocol with respect to the Brucella case but differ on allegations of rule breaking in the Q fever case. In their defense, they stated that the diseases have not killed anyone, are not very contagious among humans, and have not endangered the public.

Texas A&M is in charge of the National Center for Foreign Animal and Zoonotic Disease Defense, which has been designated a "center of excellence" in the U.S. The center receives \$18 million in funding from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in the form of a biodefense research grant. The researchers had been working on vaccines for Brucella and Q fever. Both agents are considered "terror agents" and could be used in biological warfare.