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Health & Science

House panel seeks expanded GAO review of smallpox incident at NIH

By Lena H. Sun May 19, 2015

The cold-storage room where vials of smallpox were discovered in cardboard boxes last summer at the National Institutes of Health had been inspected four times by NIH safety personnel, according to documents provided to a House panel investigating the incident.

During two safety surveys in October 2011, personnel inspecting labs and the common cold-storage room noted the presence of cardboard storage, which was prohibited. One inspector wrote an additional comment: "Please remove all cardboard from the cold room."

Inspection reports from 2012 and 2013, however, indicate no cardboard in the storage room, raising questions about what happened, lawmakers said.

Government officials have said that the long-forgotten smallpox samples dating to the 1950s were among hundreds of vials of pathogens discovered in that cold-storage room July 1, 2014. Officials said the vials, stored in cardboard boxes, had been overlooked for decades. They were found when personnel for the Food and Drug Administration, which oversaw the labs in Building 29A, were cleaning out the building to prepare for a move to the FDA's main campus in White Oak, Md.

Two of six vials of smallpox were found to have live virus and were destroyed.

In a letter Tuesday, Rep. Fred Upton (R-Mich.), who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee, and Rep. Tim Murphy (R-Pa.), who chairs its oversight subcommittee, said the inspection reports raise new questions. They asked that the Government Accountability Office expand its review of the handling of biological agents and toxins by federal laboratories.

Among the lawmakers' questions: If the boxes had been there for decades, why weren't the smallpox vials discovered earlier? And if later inspections found no cardboard in the cold-storage room, did the inspectors miss seeing those boxes or ignore them? Or had the boxes been temporarily moved?

“We believe the information and evidence discovered from the investigation provides a basis to believe that there were additional lapses and concerns involved with the retention of smallpox samples than just the failure to account for undiscovered, and presumably abandoned, materials,” the lawmakers wrote.

In a statement, Deborah Wilson, who heads NIH’s Division of Occupational Health and Safety, which oversees the inspections, said: “The cardboard that is referred to in the inspection reports is cardboard that is abandoned in cold rooms across campus usually on the floors. It becomes wet and then molds, contaminating the cold rooms. In order to curtail this problem we check cold rooms for abandoned cardboard left on floors and in wet piles. It has nothing to do with cardboard boxes on shelves in which research materials may be stored.”

The smallpox discovery, along with other incidents involving the mishandling of pathogens at government labs, prompted a months-long sweep of federal laboratories last year involving nearly a dozen federal agencies, 4,000 lab facilities from Arkansas to Alaska, and more than 40 million biological samples.

Officials disclosed that they had found improperly stored substances. They included ricin, the bacterium that causes plague, the bacterium that causes botulism, and vials of virulent bird flu virus. Some samples were destroyed. Others were transferred to labs authorized to house them. Federal officials said that the incidents have prompted a move toward better accounting and safety protocols throughout government labs.

Lena H. Sun is a national reporter for The Washington Post, focusing on health.

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