

NIH Denies It Has Smallpox Sample

Scientist in Charge of Lab Says Allegation Is 'Categorically False'

By Justin Gillis
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People who live near the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda learn of yesterday that experts are checking into allegations that a laboratory there is harboring smallpox virus. There is no hard evidence and scientists who run the lab deny it.

NIH safety officers got an anonymous tip last week that a top-ranking person at the lab, in a casual conversation a couple of years ago, said there was smallpox in the freezers.

"These allegations are categorically false," Carleton Gajdusek, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who oversees the lab, said in a statement. "No work has ever been done on this substance in the laboratory in NIH. No samples of this substance are or ever have been stored in the laboratory freezers."

Even if the allegation proved true, the virus would not be immediately threatening, as long as the samples remained frozen. But finding it would be a big deal. It's not supposed to be there.

Smallpox was one of humanity's great scourges. It killed at least 100 million people in recent centuries. Now smallpox is one of humanity's great successes.

The last American case was reported in 1949. A worldwide effort to vaccinate people in even the poorest countries began in the 1960s. In

1977, the last case of transmission in the wild was reported, in Somalia.

Smallpox is the only major human disease that has been wiped off the face of the Earth.

Scientific samples of smallpox virus were once scattered throughout

If smallpox were found, that would be "a very serious transgression against science."

— Anne Thomas, NIH spokeswoman

the world. Supposedly, they have been consolidated at two sites: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and a laboratory in Russia. Scientists have debated whether to destroy those remaining samples.

One nagging fear in the scientific community is that there's still smallpox virus out there that nobody knows about. Maybe some scientist has had it in a freezer for years, and forgot. Maybe a terrorist is storing it for use as a biological weapon.

Routine smallpox vaccinations were stopped in the United States in 1971 and in most of the world by the early 1980s. Even in people who have been vaccinated, immunity can fade.

Thus, when that anonymous call came to NIH on Sept. 11, it got people's attention.

The next day, safety officers showed up unannounced at Gajdusek's Laboratory of Cellular and Nervous System Studies and locked up more than 20 freezers. Now they are going through the samples, which go back decades, looking at the labels to see if they can find smallpox.

Gajdusek, who won a Nobel prize in 1976 for research on viruses unrelated to smallpox, said they won't find anything.

And if they did?

"That would be regarded as a very serious transgression against science," said Anne Thomas, a spokeswoman for NIH. "It would be taken very seriously."

Even in the absence of proof, NIH has decided to let people know what's going on. It is sending notice to more than 500 employees of the building where the lab is located, Building 36. And it conducted a briefing yesterday for leaders of the Bethesda neighborhoods near NIH.

The residents, who have had their differences with NIH in the past, said they were glad to be called in.

"We're very happy to see this attitude, even on a rainy Friday afternoon at the last minute," said Morton Goldman, of Bethesda, who attended. "Nobody from the community who were there really felt any concern whatsoever."