

October 23, 2001

TO: Clinical microbiology laboratories in Oregon
FROM: Michael Skeels, PhD, MPH
Director, Oregon State Public Health Laboratory
RE: Bioterrorism threats

As you know, we have spent the past year enhancing our own laboratory's capacity to respond to bioterrorist threats, and providing information to you about how your laboratory can recognize and refer infectious agents as part of the national Laboratory Response Network. Unfortunately, recent events have put us all on high alert, and this network is now being utilized. The public health system, as well as law enforcement and emergency response agencies, are receiving hundreds of calls from concerned citizens. Many threat assessments have been performed for packages, envelopes, and powders. A few of these have required testing of environmental material in our laboratory. So far, we have not found *Bacillus anthracis* or any other pathogen in any of these samples.

We have received numerous questions about the efficacy and validity of testing human and environmental samples for anthrax, especially nasal swabs. The CDC has been quite clear in saying that laboratory testing for *B. anthracis* is appropriate only in four situations:

1. Clinical evaluation of a person with signs and symptoms of anthrax. These examinations and cultures would generally be done in a hospital or other large medical laboratory, with suspicious cultures referred to the Oregon State Public Health Laboratory (OSPHL) for confirmation..
2. Firm evidence of *B. anthracis* having been released into the environment. Environmental cultures and nasal swabs of at-risk people are indicated. ***Nasal swab cultures are not appropriate except as part of an epidemiological investigation following a proven exposure.***
3. Suspicious powder, letter, package, or other material where a threat assessment indicates that lab testing should be done. (Note: In Oregon, the FBI and local law enforcement and hazardous materials teams are working together to establish clear threat assessment protocols. Local agencies can activate the Oregon Emergency Response System (OERS) if a credible threat is identified. Submission of environmental samples of this type to the OSPHL requires approval through OERS or the FBI.)
4. Following cleanup to assure decontamination has been effective. Environmental samples can be taken for *B. anthracis*.

We do not anticipate that clinical laboratories will be receiving and processing environmental powders or other materials. However, note that ***environmental samples containing highly concentrated B. anthracis spores are quite hazardous and should be handled in a Class II Type B (or higher) biological safety cabinet. Do not open envelopes, packages or other containers containing suspected spore suspensions or powders on the open laboratory bench.***

If your laboratory finds evidence of *B. anthracis* or any other suspected bioterrorism agent in a human or environmental sample, please notify the OSPHL immediately at 503.229.5882 or 503.731.4030 after hours, as well as your local health department. ***Please do not report your preliminary findings directly to the public or the news media.*** You may consult the notebook which we provided to you several months ago, titled “Bioterrorism Response Protocols for Clinical Laboratories” for assistance in identifying, ruling out, and referring these agents. If you do not have this notebook, please contact us.

There are several websites which offer information to the general public and health care providers. A good place to start is our own bioterrorism website, at <http://www.ohd.hr.state.or.us/acd/bioterr/home.htm> or the CDC bioterrorism website, <http://www.bt.cdc.gov> . We have also enclosed a copy of the interim guidelines for ambulatory care management of possible anthrax exposure. If you have questions or need additional information, please feel free to contact us. We greatly appreciate your ongoing work in protecting the public’s health.