

## Experts warn of cracks in European response to bioterrorism threats

The bioterrorism threat gripping North America didn't take long to reach across the Atlantic.

At the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) in Berlin, an Information Centre for Biological Attack Substances has been launched and is collating information on the availability of vaccines, laboratories and hospital beds throughout Germany. It also provides a hotline. "We received more than 100 calls a day over the first 3 weeks," says Susanne Glasmacher, the institute spokesperson. The RKI has also posted information for physicians on the Internet. The government has already purchased 12 vehicles equipped with oxygen tanks, gas masks and devices for taking and analyzing samples to meet the threat of radioactive, chemical or biological contamination in the Berlin area. Another 340 vehicles will be acquired by year's end for the rest of Germany.

In France, the country's facilities for decontamination and for monitoring attacks that use airborne or waterborne bioterrorism agents will be upgraded under a new program called Biotox. The government has also contracted with Aventis to manufacture 3 million doses of smallpox vaccine and will spend 150 million Euros buying ciprofloxacin.

In the UK, existing stocks of antidotes and antibiotics have been taken out of storage for distribution to doctors and hospitals, and the Public Health Laboratory Service (PHLS) has issued guidelines on responding to the anthrax threat. "Over the last 3 weeks we have been very active in giving information on anthrax, plague, smallpox and botulism to the public, together with guidance on how to deal with suspicious packages," says Brian Duerden, the medical director. However, the British Medical Association has warned that the secrecy surrounding contingency plans for countering bioterrorism may prove counterproductive if health professionals aren't given key roles.

The piecemeal nature of the national responses reveals the lack of Europe-wide criteria for dealing with bioterrorism. Systemic failures in response capacity have been identified by Wolfgang Beyer, an anthrax expert from the Veterinary Institute at the University of Hohenheim, Germany. "As far as Northern Europe is

concerned, preparations against bioterrorism have been neglected over recent years," said Beyer. "Basic channels of information are missing — for instance, people who have to deal with catastrophes do not know where to send samples for analysis. ... Meanwhile, laboratories with the capability to analyze samples are short of equipment and financial support."

A recent study in the *British Medical Journal* said these facts could be symptomatic of deficiencies in the general management of infectious disease across the European Union (EU). Weak points include the identification and reporting of cases involving more than one country and networking in order to share information and lessons on communicable disease outbreaks (*BMJ* 323:861-3).

Mike Catchpole, deputy director of the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, PHLS, and Lyle R. Peterson,

deputy director, Division of Vector-borne Infectious Disease, US National Center for Infectious Diseases, have proposed a surveillance centre for infectious diseases within the EU (*BMJ* 323:818-9).

"Europe needs an effective surveillance system for infectious diseases," says Catchpole. "For many diseases we have effective networks, but there is still room for improvement. Such improvement would strengthen Europe's capacity to respond to communicable disease threats of any sort, including bioterrorism."

In an attempt to coordinate protection planning, officials from EU member states and candidate countries have met twice over the last 3 weeks and agreed to establish centralized databanks on vaccines, antibiotics and hospital beds, and to create a team of on-call specialists. — *Claudia Orellana*, Tübingen, Germany

### ON THE NET

#### Just the facts

There's a relatively new source of information for physicians seeking drug-related information. DRUGFACTS.com ([www.drugfacts.com](http://www.drugfacts.com)) has set its sights on physicians and pharmacists who need up-to-date information about drugs for patients or customers. The site covers both medical pharmaceuticals and "natural" products.

"[This] initiative will make nearly all drug, interaction, herbal agent and tablet/capsule [information] available to pharmacists and allied health professionals worldwide without the distribution challenges of printed materials," says spokesperson Steve Hebel. It is operated by WKIHS, the company that owns Ovid Technologies.

The US-based site has 3 tiers. The first level offers a free library of drug information, listing more than 4500 pharmaceuticals alphabetically by both brand and generic name. Essentially, this is a quick online reference for indications, dosages, side effects and patient/family education.

In the second tier the site offers more extensive information about the listed pharmaceuticals, including a handy tool to identify possible drug interactions. This online Java tool allows the user to select any 2 drugs and receive a detailed analysis of possible interactions.

Access to the second level of the site requires the user to generate a profile. The information is still "free," but the publisher encourages users to provide detailed information; caution and careful reading can ensure that you don't end up with a lot of unwanted emails. The third level, which is fee-based, provides access to subscription services.

Although this tool was developed in the US, Canadian physicians would probably find it useful. The interface is simple and it is easy to gain access to useful information. And for those dull moments in the office, there's even a Health Trivia quiz that will let you test your knowledge in 24 areas. — *Michael O'Reilly*, [mike@oreilly.net](mailto:mike@oreilly.net)

