

Reacting to bioterrorism

BY MICHAEL GOCHFELD

Sept. 11 and its aftermath — the search for survivors, followed by weeks of acrid smoke and months of recovery and demolition — set the stage for anxious waiting for future acts of terrorism. We didn't have long to wait. Within a few weeks, anthrax emerged on the scene.

As frustrated or as frightened as we might have been by the World Trade Center attack, the anthrax event was, in some ways, a much more serious indictment of our unpreparedness. The response to the anthrax-laced letters, in retrospect, was clearly an embarrassing demonstration that despite decades of concern about the potential for bioterrorism, the nation had no clue as to how to evaluate or respond or communicate to the public about anthrax. What should have been an off-the-shelf response took weeks to mature, during which highly respected federal and state agencies dis-

seminated conflicting and, in some cases, wrong information.

As an occupational physician, I think I know why. Because anthrax is a bacteria, it was natural to look to infectious-disease specialists for answers. So the media and even governmental agencies consulted with microbiologists, few of whom had ever seen a case of anthrax. But throughout history, anthrax has been an occupational disease. Occupational physicians, although also unlikely to have encountered a case of anthrax, read about it as one of the prime examples of a work-related biological agent. While the dissemination of anthrax through the mails was an act of bioterrorism, the exposure of media workers, postal workers and congressional staffers was an occupational exposure.

Nowhere was this fact more tragically overlooked than in the case of a sick postal worker sent home by a Maryland hospital, which had not bothered to ask him where he worked or acted on the fact that another postal worker had recently died of pulmonary anthrax. The unfortunate worker died a few days later.

I am confident that we will be more ready next time and, as a cynic who believes that the several anthrax-bearing letters were merely a test by the terrorist, I believe there will be a next time — presumably when we least expect it. But will we be ready enough, or when quiet months have passed will we lose our edge and our vigilance and be just as unprepared?

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