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Biological terrorism and crisis management in Switzerland – Lessons learned from the anthrax alert and steps ahead

Objectives The anthrax attacks in the United States in autumn 2001 set off a wave of more than 1,000 false anthrax alerts in Switzerland. This was the first time that Switzerland was confronted with a tangible bioterrorist threat. Therefore, the Swiss authorities were barely prepared for a threat of this kind. Moreover, the anthrax incidents in autumn 2001 increased the awareness of antibiotic-resistant anthrax spores. The study aims at giving recommendations on ways to enhance Switzerland's preparedness for a future bioterrorist incident. The goal is to recommend concrete measures, such as the standardization of detection methods, that Swiss laboratories should use when there is suspicion of bioterrorism. Another recommendation will be to strengthen cooperation between human and veterinary medicine, since many germs that qualify for bioterrorism can be found in the animal world and transmitted to human beings.

Conclusions It is now up to the federal and cantonal authorities to put into action the recommendations of the report. On the federal level, it is mainly the B Area of the Federal Commission for NBC Protection (ComNBC) that is the competent body handling implementation of the report. On the cantonal level the implementation lies mainly with the intercantonal experience exchange group for technical agencies involved in biotechnology and gene technology (ERFA Bio, Interkantonale Erfahrungsaustauschgruppe von Fachstellen im Bereich der Bio- und Gentechnologie, <http://www.erfa-bio.ch>).

Main results and findings

Switzerland's preparedness for bioterrorism has been considerably improved since autumn 2001. Still, the report gave recommendations for further improvements in the following areas:

- Early warning
- Warning procedures
- Legal factors
- Crisis management groups
- Management processes
- Operational units
- Bioterrorism protection measures (location of a bioterrorist incident, transport of patients, use of medication, laboratory analysis)
- Crisis communication strategy
- Training and exercises
- Research and international networking
- The all-clear

Publications of the NRP 49 project

Guery, M.

Le terrorisme biologique et la Suisse.

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