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## Inventory Uncovers 9,200 More Pathogens

Laboratory Says Security Is Tighter, but Earlier Count Missed Dangerous Vials



FBI investigators concluded that Fort Detrick probably was the source of the anthrax spores used in the deadly mailings of 2001. (2008 Photo By Susan Biddle -- The Washington Post) | [Buy Photo](#)

By [Nelson Hernandez](#)  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Thursday, June 18, 2009

An inventory of potentially deadly pathogens at Fort Detrick's infectious disease laboratory found more than 9,000 vials that had not been accounted for, Army officials said yesterday, raising concerns that officials wouldn't know whether dangerous toxins were missing.

After four months of searching about 335 freezers and refrigerators at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Frederick, investigators found 9,220 samples that hadn't been included in a database of about 66,000 items listed as of February, said Col. Mark Kortepeter, the institute's deputy commander.

The vials contained some dangerous pathogens, among them the Ebola virus, anthrax bacteria and botulinum toxin, and less lethal agents such as Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus and the bacterium that causes tularemia. Most of them, forgotten inside freezer drawers, hadn't been used in years or even decades. Officials said some serum samples from hemorrhagic fever patients dated to the Korean War.

Kortepeter likened the inventory to cleaning out the attic and said he knew of no plans for an investigation into how the vials had been left out of the database. "The vast majority of these samples were working stock that were accumulated over decades," he said, left there by scientists who had retired or left the institute.

"I can't say that nothing did [leave the lab], but I can say that we think it's extremely unlikely," Kortepeter said.

Still, the overstock and the previous inaccuracy of the database raised the possibility that someone could have taken a sample outside the lab with no way for officials to know something was missing.

"Nine thousand, two hundred undocumented samples is an extraordinarily serious breach," said Richard H. Ebright, a professor at Rutgers University who follows biosecurity. "A small number would be a concern; 9,200 . . . at an institution that has been the focus of intense scrutiny on this issue, that's deeply worrisome. Unacceptable."

The institute has been under pressure to tighten security in the wake of the 2001 anthrax attacks, which killed five people and sickened 17. FBI investigators say they think the anthrax strain used in the attacks originated at the Army lab, and its prime suspect, Bruce E. Ivins, researched anthrax there. Ivins committed suicide last year during an investigation into his activities.

Kortepeter noted that since 2001 the lab has imposed multiple layers of security to check people entering and leaving, that there are now cameras in the labs, and that employees are subjected to a reliability program and random inspections.

"The bottom line is, we have a lot of buffers to prevent anybody who shouldn't be getting into the laboratory," Kortepeter said.

Sam Edwin, the institute's inventory control officer, said most of the samples found were vials with tiny amounts of pathogens that would thaw quickly and die once they were taken out of a freezer, making smuggling something off the base difficult.

The probe began in February, when a problem accounting for Venezuelan equine encephalitis virus triggered the suspension of most research at the lab. A spot check in January found 20 samples of the virus in a box of vials instead of the 16 listed in the institute's database. Most work was stopped until the institute could take a thorough inventory of its stock of viruses and bacteria.

Edwin said about 50 percent of the samples that had been found were destroyed. The rest were added to the catalog. Because the lab will now conduct an inventory every year, "it's really less likely that we will be in a situation like this again," he said.

Procedures have changed, too. Scientists who have worked at the lab said that in the past, departing scientists turned over their logbooks to their successors, but records were sometimes incomplete or complex. As generations of scientists passed through, the knowledge of what was in the freezers was lost. With a comprehensive database, every sample is now tracked until it is destroyed or transferred.

But some scientists are skeptical. Unlike uranium or chemical weapons, pathogens are living materials that can replicate and die. A small amount can easily be turned into a large amount. They said the strict inventories slow their work without guaranteeing security.