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Milk-threat study issued over objections

Controversial report about supply vulnerabilities to be published

From Jeanne Meserve
CNN Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The National Academy of Sciences is proceeding with publication of a study outlining how terrorists could contaminate the U.S. milk supply with botulism -- despite complaints that the article is a "road map for terrorists."

The article theorizes that hundreds of thousands of people could be poisoned if terrorists exploited vulnerabilities in milk processing.

It includes information on milk pasteurization, the dose of botulinum toxin for humans, the toxin's heat sensitivity and the capacities of the silos in which milk is stored.

The paper "is a road map for terrorists and publication is not in the interests of the United States," Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary Stewart Simonson wrote in a May letter to Dr. Bruce Alberts, the science academy chief. ([Full story](#))

But in an editorial accompanying the article, Alberts wrote that all of this information is "immediately accessible on the World Wide Web through a simple Google search."

"A terrorist who wants to do great damage will therefore not find anything in the article that is likely to increase his or her certainty concerning the minimum level of toxin to use," Alberts wrote.

Dr. Lawrence Wein, the Stanford University professor who wrote the article, praised the academy for acting "honorably and professionally."

He said the article offers concrete suggestions on how the security of the milk supply could be improved.

"There has been very little shift from food safety to food security," Wein said. "I hope this paper would help nudge the food industry in that direction ... and [the] government."

Wein told CNN he sent the paper to the Department of Health and Human Services for review in October but never heard back and assumed there were no objections to its content.

The paper appeared briefly May 30 on a password-protected area of the NAS Web site.

When Simonson wrote to the National Academy of Sciences in May asking it not to publish the study, Wein said he was "surprised."

HHS spokesman Mark Wolfson told CNN it was department officials' understanding that Wein would let them know if he submitted the study for publication; he didn't, so they never told him their thoughts.

After HHS raised objections, NAS postponed publication and met with government officials to discuss their concerns.

The paper and editorial were published Tuesday on the Academy Internet site and will appear in the July 12 print edition of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, The Associated Press reported.

In his editorial, Alberts said the publication of terrorism-related analysis in open scientific literature can make the nation safer by contributing to the design of new defenses and preventing the federal government from overestimating or underestimating a particular threat.

"Protecting ourselves optimally against terrorist acts will require that both national and state governments, as well as the public, be cognizant of the real dangers," Alberts wrote.

Wolfson said Simonson "respects the academy's decision" to publish the study, but "he doesn't agree with it."

"Good and reasonable people will disagree, but he feels the academy is wrong and that the consequences of publishing could be dire," Wolfson said.

"And it will be HHS and not the academy that will have to deal with the consequences."

"He still feels strongly that they shouldn't have published. But he can't stop them, so they are going to do it."

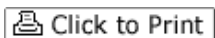
Other scientists have already raised questions about the scientific validity of Wein's study.

Alberts wrote, "This kind of give-and-take lies at the heart of scientific progress and is precisely why scientific analyses are made available in the open literature."

The National Academy of Sciences is a private, nonprofit society of scientists and engineers chartered by Congress to advise the government on science and technology.

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