

Feds: Science paper a terrorist's road map

Health agency seeks to halt scholarly publication

Tuesday, June 7, 2005 Posted: 0254 GMT (1054 HKT)

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The federal government has asked the National Academy of Sciences not to publish a research paper that feds describe as a "road map for terrorists" on how to contaminate the nation's milk supply.

The research paper on biological terrorism, by Stanford University professor Lawrence M. Wein and graduate student Yifan Liu, provides details on how terrorists might attack the milk supply and offers suggestions on how to safeguard it.

The paper appeared briefly May 30 on a password-protected area of the National Academy of Science's Web site.

Journalists use that area of the Web site to get advance copies of articles slated for publication in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

People who downloaded the Wein-Liu paper called the Food and Drug Administration for comment, and the FDA notified the Department of Health and Human Services, which asked the academy to stop the article's publication.

The paper "is a road map for terrorists and publication is not in the interests of the United States," HHS Assistant Secretary Stewart Simonson wrote in a letter to the science academy chief Dr. Bruce Alberts.

The paper gives "very detailed information on vulnerability nodes" in the milk supply chain and "includes ... very precise information on the dosage of botulinum toxin needed to contaminate the milk supply to kill or injure large numbers of people," Simonson wrote.

"It seems clear on its face that publication of this manuscript could have very serious public health and national security consequences."

Alberts wrote that acting FDA Commissioner Dr. Lester Crawford was joining him in the request to halt publication.

Officials of HHS and the academy said they are to meet Tuesday to discuss the article.

"The academy has been dealing with the issue of scientific openness versus national security since 9/11," said academy spokesman Bill Kearney.

"The academy [members] are strong advocates of scientific openness while ensuring that nothing is done to aid terrorists."

Kearney said the NAS routinely vets papers for security concerns before publishing them and had vetted the Wein-Liu paper.

After HHS raised concerns, the NAS decided to "take a step back and make sure that we weren't putting out anything that we're uncomfortable with," he said.

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

HHS spokesman Marc Wolfson said Wein showed a draft of his paper last fall to HHS staffers, who expressed concern about the level of detail in the paper.

"He, at that time, indicated that he was going to work it over a bit and he'd be back to us, back to HHS, if and when he submitted it for publication. That was the last we ... heard from him," Wolfson said.

Wein told CNN he would withhold comment until after the HHS and NAS meeting.

A week ago, The New York Times published an op-ed article by Wein outlining a possible attack scenario.

Under the most likely scenario, he wrote, a terrorist would buy toxin from an overseas black market laboratory, fill a one gallon jug with a sludgy substance containing a few grams of botulin, and pour it into an unlocked milk tank, or into a milk truck at a truck stop.

He wrote that the FDA guidelines for locking milk tanks should be made mandatory, and said the dairy industry should improve pasteurization to eliminate toxins.

Wolfson said he cannot recall another instance in which HHS has asked a scientific publication to withhold an article on national security grounds.