

National Biosafety Stewardship Month

By David Clark and Mike Kluzik

If you have access to any form of modern news outlet, you probably could not escape hearing about some of the highly publicized safety and procedure lapses at the National Institutes for Health (NIH) and Center for Disease Control (CDC) laboratories in July 2014. The stories (there was more than one incident) were carried on all major television and cable news outlets as well as prominent newspapers and web-based news outlets. In laymen terms there appears to have been biological research materials that could be dangerous to humans that were thought to be “inactive”, when in fact they were still dangerous and also some materials that require specific and very strict registration requirements were present in (previously) unknown storage locations.

We believe that the reason these incidents received so much publicity, even though no members of the public were ever at risk, is because the CDC laboratories are considered the “gold standard” for infectious disease research. As a direct result of the incidents that occurred at the CDC in July, there have been a number of high profile communications from the federal government as well as responses from national organizations that support university research activities. Here is a brief summary of a few examples of the information disseminated.

- July 16, 2014; American Biological Safety Association (ABSA). July 16, 2014. Press Release. ABSA Response to Recent Events at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This press release highlights the need for the CDC to be held to a high standard.
- August 18, 2014; The White House Memorandum;

Subject, Enhancing Biosafety and Security in the United States. This 5 page memo outlined immediate and long term action items The White House is promoting.

- August 25, 2014; American Society for Microbiology (ASM); Dear Colleague letter, “ASM Statement: What is in Your Laboratory Freezer?” This letter highlighted the importance of knowing all the microbes that exist in your lab.
- August 27, 2014; The Council on Governmental Relations (COGR); COGR Listserv e-mail, Government—wide Biosafety Stand-Down. This e-mail provided succinct and useable information to universities.
- August 28, 2014; Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) National Institutes of Health (NIH); Memorandum, Participating in National Biosafety Stewardship Month. This three page memo explains National Biosafety Stewardship Month and what NIH awardees should do.

We view what happened at the NIH and CDC laboratories as something that could have easily happened in any laboratory in a large research institution, including ours. At our institution we decided on a graded-approach based upon the culture. Here are some of the activities that we undertook:

- Posting the documents and information referenced above on our Institutional Biosafety Committee’s (IBC) website and will to use the University-wide daily communication system to announce National Biosafety Stewardship Month citing this posted information.

- Requesting that all research, teaching and diagnostic laboratories evaluate if they possess or use any biological materials considered potentially biohazardous by the IBC and if so, to ensure they have registered them with the IBC.
- Requesting that all laboratories maintain accurate inventories of biological materials located in their freezers, refrigerators, or other storage equipment. Colleges and Departments will be asked to verify any biological materials that are no longer needed will be deposited in an approved collection facility or destroyed following appropriate methods. They must also verify that any biological materials that cannot be documented should be destroyed as well.

We are viewing this as an educational opportunity that will extend beyond National Biosafety Stewardship Month. We hope to use our activities initiated this month as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue with our faculty and researchers. We are also planning to re-evaluate and re-emphasize our biosafety policies and procedures. All of this will be intertwined with additional education and training. ■

References

- American Biological Safety Association (ABSA). July 16, 2014. Press Release. American Biological Safety Association (ABSA) Response to Recent Events at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). <http://www.absa.org/pdf/140716ABSAPressRelease.pdf>
- American Society for Microbiology (ASM). August 25, 2014. Dear Colleague letter, “ASM Statement: What is in Your Laboratory Freezer?”
- The Council on Governmental Relations (COGR), Carol Blum. August 27, 2014. ; COGR Listserv e-mail, Government—wide Biosafety Stand-Down
- Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) National Institutes of Health (NIH). August 28, 2014. Memorandum, Participating in National Biosafety Stewardship Month
- The White House Memorandum. August 18, 2014. Enhancing Biosafety and Security in the United States



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