Psychological Effects of Bioterrorism: Lessons From the Nation’s Capitol

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You can not stop us.
We have this anthrax.
You die now.
Are you afraid?
Death to America.
Death to Israel.
Allah is great.
09-11-01

This is next
Take Penacilin now
Death to America
Death to Israel
Allah is great
Confirmed Anthrax Contacts
Unexpected Lethality Issues
Lethality

• Five people have died from anthrax:
  94-year-old Ottilie Lundgren of Connecticut,
  61-year-old Kathy Nguyen of New York,
  two Washington postal workers, and
  a newspaper photo editor in Florida.
• Six others survived the severe inhaled form of anthrax, and at least seven others contracted the milder cutaneous form.
• Lundgren and Nguyen cases
  – not directly linked to anthrax-laden letters mailed to the media and Capitol Hill
  – Signs point toward cross-contaminated mail as the source of their infections, but no direct proof, and no spores have been found in either of their homes
Anthrax Chronology

- Oct. 15: Letter opened in the Washington office of U.S. Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle tests positive for anthrax.
- Oct. 16: U.S. Senate offices close as hundreds line up for tests. It is announced that the anthrax mailed to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle is a pure and highly potent version.
Anthrax Chronology

- Oct. 17: Congressional leaders arrange for an unprecedented shutdown after 31 people test positive for exposure to anthrax; the number is later dropped to 28. Those exposed include workers in the offices of Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Sen. Russell Feingold and USCP officers.

- Oct. 20: Anthrax spores are found in the Ford Office Building, where mail is processed for legislators in the House of Representatives. Also, a postal worker at the Brentwood post office in Washington D.C. is tested for anthrax.
Anthrax Chronology

• Oct. 21: Thomas Morris Jr., 55, a Washington postal worker suspected of having inhalation anthrax, dies. Reports indicate that in a desperate 911 call hours before he died.
• Oct. 22: Joseph Curseen, 47, a Washington postal worker, dies of inhalation anthrax. Two more postal workers are hospitalized; nine others are ill with symptoms.
• Nov. 10 & 12: Small amounts of anthrax are discovered in 11 Senate office suites in the Hart Senate Office Building.
• Nov. 17: Capitol police close two Senate office buildings to test for anthrax spores after investigators discover a contaminated letter addressed to Sen. Patrick Leahy.
Substantial Media Attention
Our top story: More anthrax spores discovered in Washington!

And coming up:
• How anthrax threatens you in your own home!
• Investigative report: How easy is it to make anthrax in your kitchen sink?
• In depth: Who's behind all the panic over these deadly anthrax attacks?
• Weather: Could a lethal cloud of anthrax be blowing our way?
• Frugal chef: Cooking up anthrax spores on a tight budget!
WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Sen. Patrick Leahy, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said Sunday that an anthrax-laced letter mailed to his office may contain enough spores "to kill well over a 100,000 people," but he said the tainted missive had not yet been opened by investigators.

Speaking on NBC's Meet the Press, Leahy, a Vermont Democrat, appeared to be basing his comments on the letter from an initial analysis of its exterior. Sources have said some spores seeped through the sealed envelope.

"It appears that the letter sent to me may contain enough spores to kill well over a 100,000 people, but it also may well have evidence, fingerprints or anything else," Leahy said.
Ricin Attack Upon U.S. Capitol

- February 4, 2004
- Security tightened on Capitol Hill after the deadly poison ricin was found in Russell Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill
Ricin Attack Upon Capitol
Heightened Risk for First Responders
First Responders

- Heightened risk to first responders
- Containment boundaries critical
- Conflicting duties between containment and investigation
- Heightened concern re: additional sources and secondary risks
- Awareness of first responders’ risk to their own families
Fear of Contamination
Striking Home

“As a cop, I’m used to the idea that I could get hurt or killed in the line of duty. I’m not used to the fact that I could infect my kids when I hug them after work.
What makes bioterrorism different psychologically from other trauma

• Continuing nature of threat
• Intensity of intervention activity
• Concern re: subsequent attacks or other undetected incidents
What makes bioterrorism different psychologically from other trauma

- Invisible nature of threat
- Expanding boundaries of threat
- Uncertainty re: extent and nature of exposure
- Delayed onset of symptoms
- Tendency to minimize nature and potential effects of incident
Lingering Reminders
Lingering Reminders

• Clean-up and eradication
• Heightened and lingering concerns re: vulnerability given easy transmission of substances via mail
• Heightened hoax activity
• Smallest inconveniences serve as reminders
Psychological Effects

- Staff must wrestle with idea that someone would deliberately expose them to anthrax.
- The disruption of many office staff working in new location adds to the stress of the incident itself. Timelines often shifted and were uncertain.
- Financial concerns may exist (e.g., health, disability, personal effects).
- Family may have concerns for worker’s safety. Workers may, in turn, may have increasing feelings of protectiveness for their families.
Psychological Effects

Despite the fact that the majority of letters contaminated with anthrax spores have been addressed to congressional leaders and news anchors, those infected have not been the intended targets. Instead, the victims of the anthrax attacks have been primarily the postal workers and mailroom employees who typically handle the contaminated mail first, leaving many to wonder "Will I be next?"

Dr. Gerard Jacobs, American Red Cross Disaster Services Human Resources, American Red Cross release November 21, 2001
Practical Considerations and Lessons Learned

• Need to educate, educate, educate
• Understand concerns re: need for immediate education—immediate hunger for information
• Education often invaluable when in multimodal and multimedia formats—however some may focus disproportionately on negative information
• Sensitivity to conflicting information

Be mindful of rumors
Practical Considerations and Lessons Learned

Safety Issues

• Respect containment procedures (for safety of yourself and others)
• Be sensitive to perceptions and concerns of potential continuing risk
• Respect possibility of future attack
Practical Considerations and Lessons Learned

• Do not ignore additive effect of prior trauma (e.g., Weston Shooting, attempted 9/11 attack upon Capitol, multiple anthrax exposures and ricin attack.)

• Recognize emotional response to bioterror agents & attacks regardless of level of prior knowledge or training re: agents
Practical Considerations and Lessons Learned

• Both possibility and heightened perception of continuing threat and risk-- even after initial exposure

• Respect the potential for lingering psychological after-effects given possible re-exposure or injury

• Some negative effects may be perpetuated by subsequent hoax activity