

Congress of the United States
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Subcommittee on Technology, Terrorism, and Government Information
of the Senate Judiciary Committee

Hearing on Germs and Toxins as Domestic Terrorist Threats

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Testimony of Michael V. Drake, MD

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Madame Chair, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

I am Michael Drake, Vice President for Health Affairs for the University of California system, and a member of the faculty at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine. I have been asked to speak on our responses to the events of the past several weeks.

The University of California's mission includes a strong emphasis on basic research in the public interest. The University manages 10 campuses and three national laboratories, including 15 health sciences schools in seven disciplines including medicine, public health, and veterinary medicine.

In response to the discovery of anthrax in Florida in early October, California Governor Gray Davis contacted the University of California and other institutions with questions regarding our state's ability to respond to such an attack. He followed this contact with an Executive Order establishing – under the auspices of the State Strategic Committee on Terrorism – a series of subcommittees, including the Subcommittee on the Protection of the Public Health. I co-chaired this committee along with Dr. Diana Bonta, Director of the California Department of Health Services. The committee met on October 19 and submitted its confidential report to the Governor on October 25. The committee includes “representatives from the University of California, medical and health care associations, public health organizations and state agencies and departments.”

While the specific findings and recommendations to the Governor remain confidential due to the sensitive nature of the information, I am pleased to share with you today the general sense of the committee on several important issues related to bioterrorism.

Our subcommittee found that there is a need to improve the communication between and training of personnel in the continuum of public health services, from the initial response teams to the treating physicians and nurses. This involves improving information services directed at both public health professionals and the general public; improving coordination among local, state and federal agencies; and doing all of this in ways that will strengthen the public health system, even in the hopeful event that no further terrorist attacks occur.

Several efforts in this regard have been initiated by the CDC. And obviously the events of the past several weeks teach us that we should accelerate our efforts to make these programs fully operational and to expand their reach.

In all cases it is crucial to make certain that our crisis management infrastructure and protocols enhance our ability to manage the ubiquitous chronic problems that affect the public's health on a daily basis. There's a common aphorism used on the wards of our teaching hospitals that states : "When you hear hoof beats it's more likely a herd of horses than a stampede of zebras." Stated differently, common diseases occur in uncommon ways more often than uncommon diseases occur. In preparing for attacks of bio-terrorism we are guarding against the uncommon. But we must not lose sight of the myriad problems we were dealing with on September 10th. We were very engaged in issues of great importance to the health of the public on a daily basis. Those problems did not disappear on September 11th. Our public health system is understaffed and under funded; many Americans are vulnerable to disease and injury in ways that we could avoid. We should seek solutions that not only enhance our national security, but that also improve the public safety.

In demographically diverse states like California it is important to provide public information in a culturally competent manner and in multiple languages.

In addition to the public health response, University faculty are actively pursuing solutions to problems that may affect us in the future. For example researchers working in the field of bio-filtration are investigating ways of removing highly toxic materials from the air, as well as novel detection techniques and methods for degrading toxic pollutants. Researchers in the Environmental Energy Technology Division at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory are developing building management strategies to reduce occupant exposures to an unexpected release of a toxic aerosol or gas.

Although much of our country's attention over the past month has appropriately focused on bio-terrorism, we remain cognizant of the possibilities of other types of threats as well. Two of our newly funded California Institutes for Science and Innovation are also conducting research into ways to defend critical infrastructures such as the telecommunications system, power grid, air traffic control system and financial markets against physical or cyber attacks.

Our research scientists are critical to this endeavor in another way. At a recent meeting hosted by the Association of Academic Health Centers, Tara O'Toole from the center for Civilian Biodefense Studies at Johns Hopkins observed that biology is on the precipice of losing its innocence in the 21st century, the way that physics lost its innocence in the 20th. Unlike weapons of mass destruction arising from the realm of physics, biological weapons do not necessarily require a state supported program. They can be developed by a few individuals, with fairly modest resources. We will be increasingly

dependant on the scientific community to work with law enforcement and other branches of government to develop effective measures for insuring the public safety. It is important that the federal government continue to work with the scientific community on this issue, and that we avoid regulations or policies that curtail the ability of our scientists to advance their craft in beneficial ways. My colleagues at the University of California, and I am certain I speak for faculty at other academic institutions as well, would welcome the opportunity to work with you on developing policies that increase laboratory security without compromising laboratory research.

Another area in which the University's faculty and academic medical centers can have an immediate impact is by providing timely information to our students, the practicing community and general public

We have added new courses for our students and our broader constituency to learn more about the potential causes, effects, and repercussions of terrorism on our shores. Fifty new courses were added at UCLA, for example. At UCSF the noon lecture series, open to the public, has begun a series featuring discussions of topics ranging from bio terrorism to religious intolerance. The Association of American Medical Colleges last week announced an initiative to help educate and prepare the nation's physician workforce to respond appropriately to terrorist attacks. One component of this project will focus on integrating bio-terrorism education into the medical school curriculum.

Research universities take seriously their public service responsibility to respond to threats to our health and security. This is particularly clear to us at the University of California because of our successful half-century of

management of the national laboratories in Berkeley, Livermore, and Los Alamos. The marriage between academic scientific inquiry and national security has been sound and mutually beneficial. We, along with our sister institutions, stand ready to address prevention and response to attacks and natural disasters. We are actively pursuing these issues at the present time, and look forward to working with you as we refine and improve programs that address the reality of terrorism in the future.

Senator, on behalf of the University of California, we applaud your leadership in the wake of the recent threats to our homeland security and we look forward to working with you and your colleagues as you continue to work on the many difficult issues facing our nation.

Thank you for your time and attention. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.