

Commentary

6th Review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention

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Statement delivered by Gigi Kwik Gronvall, PhD, November 21, 2006

Mr. President, Excellencies, Distinguished Representatives, Ladies and Gentlemen: I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Center for Biosecurity of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. The Center for Biosecurity is a non-profit organization located in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States. I am a biological scientist, and my colleagues include physicians, public health professionals, social scientists, and other biological scientists. Together we develop policies and practices intended to prevent large-scale epidemics due to bioterrorism and natural causes and, should prevention fail, to mitigate the consequences of an epidemic.

I would like to comment on the most recent intersession meeting of the BWC, and offer a recommendation for a future meeting.

A code of conduct for scientists would be a positive development. Scientists can and should be made aware that the same research that holds promise for human health and understanding of the living world can also be misused for harm.

However, the so-called ‘dual-use’ issue will never be solved. There will always be new scientific developments that hold great promise and great risks. The possibility that research could be misused is the trade we make for the promise of future medicines and agricultural advances. The capability of an individual or small group to develop and use an advanced biological weapon will expand at the same pace as legitimate research.

The threat of a biological weapons attack is large and rapidly growing larger, but our capability to respond is lagging far behind. If an attack is a contagious disease, an international response will be necessary to avoid illness and death on a large scale and to limit social, economic and political aftershocks. Medicines and vaccines will need to be developed, refined, produced, and distributed to bring an end to the event, as well as to reduce the effects of a repeat attack. This type of global response is not yet feasible. This deficiency should be addressed by the BWC.

The BWC should hold a meeting in the next intersession to discuss the global *scientific* response to a biological attack. Scientific expertise will be critical in mitigating the consequences of an attack, so the responsibilities of scientists should be defined now for policymakers and for the public.

Should a bioattack occur, public health professionals, doctors, politicians, journalists, and people everywhere in the world will make critical decisions for their organizations and their personal health based upon the scientific facts of a disease, as the outbreak unfolds. Even if a relatively well-characterized

pathogen is used as a weapon, there will be knowledge gaps about the disease, how it spreads, and how existing therapies can and should be used, which will need to be quickly addressed by scientific researchers.

A meeting on the scientific response to an attack could explore how scientific information can be generated and communicated in the midst of a security crisis; how to share and transport biological samples rapidly, methodically, and safely; how to manage policy-relevant, but non-validated scientific information; how international scientific collaborations can be managed, and how to ensure laboratory safety. There are opportunities to learn from the successes and mistakes made in the scientific response to SARS and H5N1 avian influenza; such lessons may save lives in the wake of a bioattack.

No international agency has the charge to coordinate a scientific response to a biological attack. The World Health Organization certainly would be involved in the overall public health response, but they would require collaboration and commitment from other sources, including the BWC.

A meeting on the scientific response to a bioattack would be an opportunity for the BWC to expect and encourage more from scientists around the world. Scientists can do more than simply be aware of the dual-use problem, and they should do more than merely adhere to the norm against biological weapons development and use. Their expertise is a critical resource, and the BWC should start planning now how to use that resource, to mitigate the consequences of a biological attack.