NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

DAILY NEWS, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2001

No reason to panic

If New Yorkers needed another problem — and we don't — it came yesterday morning with the report of an anthrax case in the heart of Manhattan. An NBC employee at 30 Rock had been diagnosed with the cutaneous form of the disease, thought to have been transmitted through the mail. And later, a letter containing a powdery substance was reported at The New York Times. By noon, media mailrooms were being closed. Rumors spread across the city.

But panic did not.

And that makes all the difference.

Anxiety is expected. So, too, after Sept. 11, is vigilance. The two go hand-in-hand and are weapons the public can wield against terrorists. Or even pseudo-terrorists, who we know are out there.

The NBC case might very well be the work of some homegrown psycho. The head of the local FBI office, Barry Mawn, said there appears to be "no connection whatsoever" to last month's attacks. But the investigation will go on. The public can take solace in the fact that authorities, local and federal, have been forthcoming with pertinent information. Within minutes of the news' breaking, Mayor Giuliani — once again evidencing his incomparable crisis-management skills — was on the air, talking straight and calming fears.

"People should not overreact to this," the mayor said. So true. As health officials have been emphasizing, anthrax is not contagious. There's no Anthrax Mary lurking about. And the form of the disease reported here — which affects the skin — is readily treatable.

That doesn't, however, negate the need for the above-mentioned vigilance. The country is at war, and our enemy is not above using biological weapons. We have been warned of the probability of future attacks, by means unknown. Every American has to operate in a heightened state of awareness. Not paranoia. Awareness.

Which means keeping your eyes and ears open. The best security the United States has are the 280 million people who live here. If something, someone, arouses suspicion or appears out of the norm, contact local law enforcement. Do not hesitate. Do not worry that you will be thought foolish. You will be thought patriotic.

At his press conference Thursday night, President Bush urged exactly this. After Sept. 11, he said, the American people are "facing a different world." And living in that world entails accepting personal responsibility for helping to guard the nation.

Our responsibility also entails a refusal to panic, to cower. Asked about the anthrax scares, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson gave an answer applicable to all the threats: "The terrorists want to scare us, they want it to affect our way of life and see us living in fear. We cannot let them succeed."

We cannot. We shall not.

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