NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

Anthrax Danger Delays Inspection of Millions of Letters

By DAVID E. ROSENBAUM

WASHINGTON, Nov. 5 — Three weeks after an envelope filled with anthrax spores was opened in Senator Tom Daschle's office, government officials say they have been unable to examine millions of other letters to determine whether any of them also contain anthrax.

Government officials say it is still too dangerous to examine the millions of letters that have been impounded and stored since the anthrax scare hit Washington. As a result, the authorities have no way of knowing whether the contamination of post offices and mailrooms and the illnesses contracted here and in New York and New Jersey were all caused by spores that seeped out of the letter to Mr. Daschle and contaminated other mail or whether some contamination came from other letters containing the anthrax bacteria. Law enforcement officials say they have not ruled out either possibility.

Azeezaly S. Jaffer, vice president and chief spokesman for the United States Postal Service, said today that millions of pieces of mail would eventually be screened letter by letter for anthrax contamination, but only after the letters were subjected to irradiation.

Anthrax can be detected even after the bacteria are killed by irradiation, officials have said.

Although officials have begun the irradiation process, Mr. Jaffer said he had no idea when investigators would begin looking at each letter in hopes of finding clues that could lead to an arrest in the case.

The screening, he said in a conference call with reporters, will be performed by postal inspectors in coordination with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"This is something absolutely new for us," Mr. Jaffer said, so the postal authorities are following "a slow and methodical process."

If other letters with anthrax turn up, they could contain valuable forensic evidence and new information about how extensive the plot was to send microbes through the mail.

'This is something absolutely new for us,' a Post Office official says.

So far, only three letters with anthrax have been found — the one to Mr. Daschle, in which the germs were in a form that allowed them to become airborne and thus potentially lethal; one to The New York Post, in which the anthrax was less finely milled, and one to NBC, where too little anthrax was collected for a good analysis.

Meanwhile today, the Environmental Protection Agency seemed to be having second thoughts about a plan to decontaminate the Hart Building, where Mr. Daschle, the Democratic leader, has his office, by making the building airtight and fumigating it with chlorine dioxide gas, a powerful disinfectant.

Tina Kreisher, a spokeswoman for the agency, said a peer review group of scientists and doctors examined the plan over the weekend and said more engineering and design studies were needed.

The gas has been tested in a large trailer, and it killed bacteria without damaging papers, computers and artwork. But it has never been used in a large building. The peer review group raised questions about matters like the humidity, the temperature and proper strength, Ms. Kreisher said.

"There is no long-term study on how to kill anthrax," she said.

One possibility, Ms. Kreisher said, is to use the chlorine compound in a liquid form to disinfect the stairwells and elevators where traces of anthrax were found and decide later how to decontaminate Mr. Daschle's office itself.

No one was willing to speculate when the building, where 50 senators have offices, could reopen. On the House side of the Capitol, the Longworth House Office Building opened today after having been closed for two weeks for decontamination.

Over the weekend, small amounts of anthrax were discovered in two mailboxes in a post office in the Pentagon. The office was cleaned, and later tests for anthrax were negative, Mr. Jaffer said.

In buildings that house the mailrooms of the Food and Drug Administration and the Voice of America, tests last week that showed evidence of anthrax have turned out to be false positives, and new tests found that the buildings were not infected, health officials said today.

The mail the authorities intend to screen to see if they can find other letters has been taken from the central post office for the Washington area on Brentwood Road and sent to Lima, Ohio, for irradiation to kill anthrax bacteria.

Mr. Jaffer said many millions of pieces of mail were involved. He said he did not know how much had already been decontaminated and sent back to Washington, and he would not say where the mail was being stored after it was returned.

After it is sorted by the postal inspectors, he said, unsuspicious mail will be delivered, and suspicious letters and packages will be set aside for scrutiny.

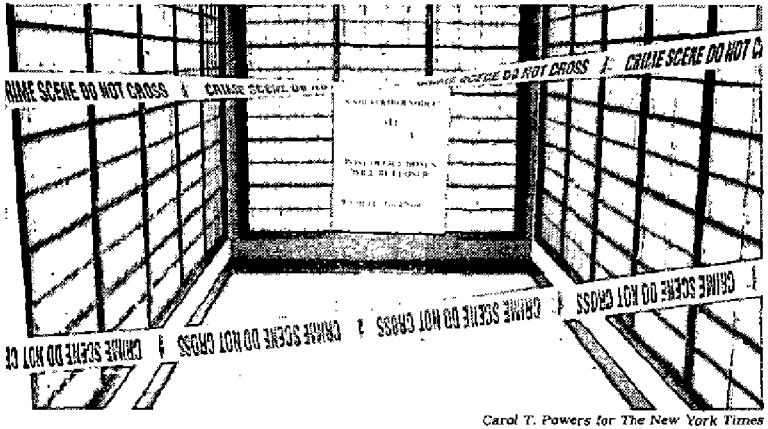
For now, all letters mailed to government offices are being sent to Ohio for treatment, Mr. Jaffer said. This means the letters are delivered weeks late. The government is buying irradiation equipment so the mail can be treated in the Washington area.

Elsewhere, the effects of the anthrax attacks were still being felt today. A postal worker who contracted the first case of inhalation anthrax in New Jersey was released from the hospital and immediately held a news conference to urge Americans not to panic.

"We don't have to stand back and cower in fear," said the worker, Norma Wallace, who works in the Hamilton Township mail-sorting center.

When she was hospitalized in Mount Holly on Oct. 18, Ms. Wallace had a fever of 102 degrees and large amounts of fluid in her lungs. Doctors gave her a 50 percent chance of survival. Her doctors gave her a series of antibiotics intravenously and used a syringe and then chest tubes to drain her lungs. The doctors now expect her to recover fully.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have confirmed five anthrax cases in New Jersey, four of them at the Hamilton



Carol T. Powers for The New York Times

A Pentagon post office, where small amounts of anthrax turned up over the weekend. After the office was cleaned, anthrax tests were negative.

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Annie McCormick for the New York Times

Norma Wallace, New Jersey's first case of inhalation anthrax, spoke to reporters yesterday after being released from a hospital in Mount Holly.

center. Two cases are inhalation anthrax, and three are skin anthrax.

Ms. Wallace said she believed she contracted the disease when a high-speed automatic sorting machine jammed. When she went to fix it, there was powder on the electric eye that reads bar codes on envelopes.

The New Jersey state epidemiologist, Dr. Eddy A. Bresnitz, said today that all the state's anthrax cases, including a letter carrier and an accounting firm employee, were linked to the Hamilton sorting center.

Dr. Bresnitz said the mail sent to the accounting firm and the mail delivered by the letter carrier might have been contaminated by anthrax-laden letters processed at Hamilton. "A lot of people are starting to think cross-contamination is a real possibility," Dr. Bresnitz said.

In New York, a postal union has been trying to close New York City's largest mail-sorting center, but the federal government filed legal papers today asserting that the site was safe and should remain open. The New York Metro Area Postal Union seeks an injunction to close the Morgan Distribution and Processing Facility until it is thoroughly cleaned. Anthrax contamination has been found on five sorting machines on the center's third floor.

Judge John F. Keenan of Federal District Court in Manhattan has scheduled a hearing for Tuesday to determine whether to close the sorting center.

And at City Hall in New York, environmental officials were testing for anthrax after trace amounts were found on a package that NBC News sent a month ago to Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's chief of staff. City officials said the package might have picked up spores from an anthrax-laced letter that was mailed to NBC on Sept. 18 from Trenton.

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