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FBI on lookout for vanished Ebola expert

By MARSHA KRANES

Concerned that bioterrorists may be involved, the FBI is closely monitoring a Memphis, Tenn., police probe into the disappearance of a famed Harvard microbiologist who specializes in Ebola and other deadly viruses.

Professor Don C. Wiley vanished 11 days ago during the annual meeting of the scientific advisory board of the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis.

The FBI has been keeping tabs on the probe because of Wiley's "field of expertise" and "given our state of affairs post-Sept. 11," said Special Agent William Woerner.

Wiley, 57, is the second scientist linked to St. Jude to draw the attention of the FBI. The first was Chilean pediatrician Antonio Banfi, an infectious-disease expert who received an anthrax-laced letter two weeks ago at his St. Jude-affiliated hospital in Santiago.

Asked if the two cases could be linked, FBI spokesman George Bolds in Memphis said he considered it "certainly conceivable" — but unlikely.

Wiley's rental car was found Nov. 16 on a Memphis bridge four hours after he left a St. Jude banquet.

Suicide was immediately suspected because the 100-foot-high bridge is a magnet for jumpers. But Wiley's associates and relatives are convinced he didn't take his own life.

"He was in good spirits," said Richard Shadyac, national executive director of St. Jude. "I was with him that night — we had dinner together. Afterwards, he went to the hospitality suite with several board members.

"He left at midnight — he was staying with his father, who lives just outside Memphis. His wife and two children were coming down for the weekend. It's just not consistent with suicide."

Shadyac said a top police official told him detectives are focusing on three possible scenarios besides suicide: a kidnapping for money, a kidnapping by bioterrorists, and robbery.

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