

C.D.C. Says Tuberculosis Lab, Shut Amid Exposure Scare, Can Continue Its Work

By Donald G. McNeil Jr.

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Operations can resume at a government tuberculosis laboratory in Atlanta that was shut down this month as part of a moratorium on handling dangerous microbes, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Thursday.

The moratorium, imposed by the agency after two accidents at other laboratories that could have exposed workers to anthrax and the lethal H5N1 flu virus, was lifted at the lab because it has passed safety inspections and its work is crucial to treating drug-resistant tuberculosis cases all over the world, said Thomas Skinner, a C.D.C. spokesman.

Top priority for reopening will go to labs directly involved in patient care and fighting epidemics, Mr. Skinner said. For example, he said, the labs handling the Ebola and chikungunya viruses might reopen soon because the worst epidemic of Ebola in history is underway in West Africa, and cases of chikungunya disease are being diagnosed all over the United States.

The health agency also named 11 outside safety experts who will advise its director, Dr. Thomas R. Frieden, on fixing shoddy procedures at government laboratories.

While there have been calls for a panel with broad investigative powers, like the National Transportation Safety Board, Mr. Skinner said in an email that the panel's purpose was to advise rather than investigate. But he added that "any group member wanting to visit a lab (even unannounced) and speak to any staff member working in the lab will be permitted to do so."

None of the panel's members have ever been employed by the C.D.C. Ten of the 11 teach at American medical schools or work at state laboratories; the exception is Heather Sheeley, who works in Britain's public health agency.

The chairmen are Joseph Kanabrocki, assistant dean for biosafety at the University of Chicago, and Dr. Kenneth Berns of the University of Florida's medical school.

The appointments drew mixed reviews from other experts. Michael T. Osterholm, a bioterrorism expert who is director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, called the panel “an outstanding group.”

Amir Attaran, an expert on public health policy at the University of Ottawa, said the panel’s mandate seemed unusually vague and broad, since the news release describing it referred not just to C.D.C. labs but to “laboratories across the United States,” including private, academic and other federal ones.

He criticized the lack of foreigners as “almost jingoistic,” since an accident with an infectious agent could lead to a global pandemic.

Mr. Skinner said the decision to appoint mostly Americans was made “from a logistical standpoint.”

Correction: July 26, 2014

An article on Friday about a decision by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to allow a tuberculosis laboratory to reopen quoted incorrectly from comments by Thomas Skinner, a C.D.C. spokesman. He said, “any group member wanting to visit a lab (even unannounced) and speak to any staff member working in the lab will be permitted to do so.” He did not say, “speaking in the lab.”

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