



Bioterrorism: An unintended boost to public health?

The practice of medicine is always interesting, frequently exciting, and sometimes exhilarating. Every generation or so, however, a medical issue comes along that is so alarming in its manifestations and, possibly more importantly, its implications, that it changes the way we approach our profession on a daily basis.

In my lifetime, the polio epidemic of the 1950s and the appearance of AIDS in the late 1970s come to mind. The recent identification of several cases of anthrax infection in the United States probably would not qualify for this short list, were it not for the high likelihood, indeed near-certainty at this writing, that these cases were intentionally transmitted as a terrorist act of war. And while anthrax is bad enough, the implication that something much worse could be coming is even more chilling.

In this issue of the *Journal* (page 1001), you will find a succinct but detailed discussion by Dr. Thomas Noeller of the whole issue of biological and chemical warfare. Physicians need to be familiar with the manifestations of the most likely agents of this insidious form of attack, so that we can identify cases early and take appropriate action to save lives of those affected and prevent spread throughout the population.

You will also find an editorial by Dr. James Pile and Dr. David Longworth about how the recent cases are challenging old dogma about anthrax, and what our health system must do to respond (page 998).

If anything good comes of recent events, it might be the rejuvenation of America's public health system, which has languished in recent years. The benefits of such rejuvenation would extend far beyond enhancement of our ability to deal with a mini-epidemic of anthrax induced by a handful of madmen. It would include a full program of preventive medicine, better epidemiology, and the ability to recognize and deal with real epidemics.

If this occurs, the bin Ladens of the world will have truly failed to accomplish their evil goals and will have unintentionally done a service for the US health care system and the American public that our politicians have been unable to accomplish.

JOHN D. CLOUGH, MD
Editor-in-Chief