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Army germ lab shut down by CDC in 2019 had several 'serious' protocol violations that year

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A sign on the door of a Biosafety Level 4 laboratory at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick, Md., Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2011. (AP Photo/Patrick Semansky)



FREDERICK, Md. — In 2019, an Army laboratory at Fort Detrick that studies deadly infectious material like Ebola and smallpox was shut down for a period of time after a CDC inspection, with many projects being temporarily halted.

The lab itself reported that the shutdown order was due to ongoing infrastructure issues with wastewater decontamination, and the CDC declined to provide the reason for the shutdown due to national security concerns.

READ: [Army germ research lab in Md. that was working on Ebola treatment is](#)

shut down by CDC

ABC7 has received documents from the CDC outlining violations they discovered during a series of inspections that year, some of which were labeled "serious."

Earlier that year, the US Army Medical Research Institute [had announced](#) an experiment at the Fort Detrick laboratory that would involve infecting rhesus macaque monkeys with active Ebola virus to test a cure they were developing.

Several of the laboratory violations the CDC noted in 2019 concerned "non-human primates" infected with a "select agent", the identity of which is unknown — it was redacted in all received documents, because disclosing the identity and location of the agent would endanger public health or safety, the agency says. In addition to Ebola, the lab works with other deadly agents like anthrax and smallpox.

Select agents are defined by the CDC as "biological agents and toxins that have been determined to have the potential to pose a severe threat to public health and safety, to animal and plant health, or to animal or plant products."

Here are some of the violations the CDC observed during inspections of Fort Detrick that year:

OBSERVATION 1

Severity level: Serious

The CDC reported that an individual partially entered a room multiple times without the required respiratory protection while other people in that room were performing procedures with a non-human primate on a necropsy table.

"This deviation from entity procedures resulted in a respiratory occupational exposure to select agent aerosols," the CDC wrote.

OBSERVATION 2

Severity level: Serious

The CDC reported that the lab did not ensure that employee training was properly verified when it came to toxins and select agents.

“These failures were recognized through video review of laboratorians’ working in BSL3 and ABSL3 labs,” their report said. “[These] indicate the [lab]’s means used to verify personnel understood the training had not been effective, leading to increased risk of occupational exposures.”

The CDC went on to specify that a laboratorian who was not wearing appropriate respiratory protection was seen multiple times “partially entering” a room where non-human primates that were infected with [redacted] were “housed in open caging.” They also observed a laboratorian disposing of waste in a biohazardous waste bin without gloves on.

OBSERVATION 3

Severity level: Moderate

In this violation observation, the CDC went into more detail on the incident of the worker not wearing gloves while disposing of biohazardous waste, writing that “biosafety and containment procedures must be sufficient to contain the select agent or toxin.”

The corrective action they recommended was to confirm that relevant personnel have been trained to wear gloves to prevent exposure to hazardous materials.

OBSERVATION 4

Severity level: Serious

In this observation, the CDC notes that the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases had “systematically failed to ensure implementation of biosafety and containment procedures commensurate with the risks associated with working with select agents and toxins.”

The violation specifically observed involved “entity personnel [...] propping open” a door while removing “large amounts of biohazardous waste” from an adjacent room,

“[increasing] the risk of contaminated air from [the room] escaping and being drawn into the [redacted]” where the people working “typically do not wear respiratory protection.”

OBSERVATION 5

Severity level: Moderate

The CDC reported that the laboratory failed to safeguard against unauthorized access to select agent. They wrote that personal protective equipment worn while decontaminating something contaminated by a select agent had been stored in open biohazard bags, in an area of the facility that the CDC has redacted for security reasons.

“By storing regulated waste in this area, the entity did not limit access to those with access approval,” they wrote.

OBSERVATION 6

Severity level: Moderate

The CDC reports that someone at the lab did not maintain an accurate or current inventory for a toxin.

OBSERVATION 7

Severity level: Low

The CDC reports that a building at the Fort Detrick laboratory didn’t have a “sealed surface to facilitate cleaning and decontamination.” This included cracks around a conduit box, cracks in the ceiling, and a crack in the seam above a biological safety cabinet.

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