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How Concerned Are You About A Biological Attack?

By Dr. Lionel C.M. VonFrederick Rawlins, President and CEO, The VonFrederickGroup

Imagine the following scenario. Terrorists secretly release smallpox virus in three shopping malls in the United States. The virus infects unsuspecting shoppers. Soon – in a little over a week, doctors recognize the disease in 20 people. In the days that follow, the virus spreads to others. There is panic. Riots rage. The health-care system is overwhelmed. Borders close. The economy reels. Twenty-one days after the initial release, the disease has spread to 25 states and 10 other countries. By then, 16,000 people have been infected and 1000 have died. Doctors estimate that in another three weeks, the number of people infected will rise to 300,000. One third of them will die.

This is not a plot for a science-fiction movie. It was a computer-simulated exercise, forecasting what would probably develop if such an outbreak occurred. The exercise, conducted by a group of prestigious think tanks, took place in June 2001. It was termed “Dark Winter.”

For many, “Dark Winter” took on a new and ominous meaning after the violence of September 11, 2001. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and on the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., dramatically showed that there exist ruthless and hate-driven people bent on the mass destruction of human life. Further, the attacks proved that the United States and, by extension, every other nation are vulnerable to such attacks. We live in a world where determined terrorists can in an instant, snuff out the lives of thousands of people. Swiftly following the September 11 attacks, U.S. Politicians and employees of the news media became the targets of letters containing anthrax, a deadly bacterium. People were fearful. Fueling such fears, the media along with experts speculated that terrorists might attack with pathogens more lethal than anthrax – plague or smallpox, for example. Perhaps certain “rogue states” were already mass-producing such material in secret laboratories. Consider a sampling of what has been written recently:

“The World Medical Association recognizes the growing threat that biological weapons might be used to cause devastating epidemics that could spread internationally. All countries are potentially at risk. The release of organisms such as smallpox, plague, and anthrax could prove catastrophic in terms of the resulting illnesses and deaths compounded by the panic such outbreaks would generate” American Medical Association.

“Unlike bombs and nerve gases, bio-weapons have finesse: the disease incubation period makes the calamity build slowly and imperceptibly. At first, a few people trickle into hospitals. Their symptoms might baffle doctors or mimic those of more common illnesses. By the time health care workers realize what is going on, entire cities could be infected.” Scientific American magazine.

“If the smallpox virus were released today, the majority of the world’s population would be defenseless, and given the virus’ 30 percent kill rate nearly two billion people could die.” Foreign Affairs magazine.

“All countries at risk. Entire cities infected. Two billion people might die.” These are alarming statements. Yet, just how likely is it that a catastrophic biological attack will be unleashed? Would you like to ask a terrorist?