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Bioterrorism defense legislation may mean more research grants

By Christine Hsu
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This week, United States House of Representatives is expected to pass a bill proposed by President Bush in his January 2003 State of the Union address to counter the threat of bioterrorism -- a bill which could affect the way that Penn and similar institutions receive funding for research.

The proposed legislation, entitled Bioshield and passed unanimously by the Senate in late May, would allocate \$5.6 billion towards the procurement and stockpiling of drugs, vaccines and devices that combat biological threats, while stimulating and strengthening funding from the National Institutes of Health towards research and development in the area of bioterrorism.

"Pharmaceutical companies are not interested in developing drugs for bioterrorism because they don't see the return Only the government can be at the center of this," said attorney and Penn alumnus Frank Rapoport, who has worked closely with legislators in the drafting of Bioshield.

According to Rapoport, Bioshield would allow pharmaceutical companies to bid for contracts from the government. The companies would present eight-year plans detailing the development of modern drugs or vaccines against anthrax, smallpox, and botulism toxin -- agents considered by the government to be the most dangerous.

If a pharmaceutical company proves successful in development, the government then agrees to buy the drug or vaccine at a negotiated price.

According to Rapoport, the new initiative may affect the way that some universities receive research funding.

"Very smart universities will be teaming up with pharmaceutical companies" to create research proposals, said Rapoport.

Rapoport said he sees the passage of Bioshield as only the beginning of a new counter-terrorist industry similar to the explosion of the defense industry following the Second World War.

"Terrorists are reputedly working on 52 different biological agents," he added, stressing the necessity of biodefense research and funding.



[Rana Molana/DP File Photo]
Theodore Sorensen, former special counsel to President John F. Kennedy, gives a speech at Huntsman Hall at an event organized by Penn's multidisciplinary anti-terrorism organization, ISTAR.

Already, the writing of Bioshield II is underway, led by Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman and Utah Senator Orrin Hatch .

Rapoport -- whose father was a professor at Penn's School of Medicine and whose sisters attended Penn as undergraduates -- would like to see Penn benefit from Bioshield funding and any further biodefense legislation.

"Much of the research should be done at Penn," Rapoport said, referring to the NIH-funded research. "Penn is just a fantastic institution."

And as combating bioterrorism moves to the forefront of the nation's defense priorities, Penn's Institute of Strategic Threat Analysis and Response should gain an increasingly prominent role in counterterrorism.

"Predominantly the agencies such as NIH and the science and technology department of homeland security are increasing the funding for the studies of psychological, social, and biological aspects of terrorism," said Harvey Rubin, director of ISTAR since its creation in 2002.

"The institute was founded because on campus we have a great number of faculty and students who have been in this area for a very long time. We thought having an institute would bring together and expand the research and teaching," said Rubin.

Because ISTAR uses a multidisciplinary approach and draws on the expertise of faculty from a variety of departments at Penn, it can study a broad range of issues related to counterterrorism, from the psychology of terrorism to issues of civil liberties and homeland security.

Members of Penn's faculty are currently researching biological agents, including Pox viruses, Anthrax, Tuberculosis, and Taxoplasmosis.