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29 October 2001

Tom Ridge, Other Federal Officials Brief on Anthrax

A "very aggressive" investigation continues, Ridge says

The federal government is continuing a "very aggressive" investigation into the source of anthrax tainted letters, Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge told reporters at the White House October 29.

"The belief within the administration is to basically leave no stone unturned," he said.

"It continues to be a very aggressive, ongoing investigation. There are a lot of theories out there; we just need some facts to turn a theory into reality," said Ridge.

The newest building found to be contaminated is the Cohen Building in Washington located at the foot of Capitol Hill, he said. It houses the Federal Drug Administration and the Voice of America.

Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said the Cohen building has "been presumptively positively tested for anthrax" and all the individuals in the mail room are on antibiotics and the mail rooms there have been closed down.

Presumptive positive, he said, means that the environmental testing will now go to laboratories at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta, for further tests. Results from those tests will be sent back within the next 24 to 48 hours, he said.

The United States Postal Service continues to work "on a 24-hour pace to isolate, treat and remediate any and all contaminated sites," Ridge said. They are also working with the White House "as rapidly as possible to restore service to the affected areas and to clean up any mail that may have been contaminated," he said.

Tom Day of the U.S. Postal Service said "in the D.C.-Baltimore area, we have over 6,000 employees on antibiotics; and in the New York-New Jersey area, nearly 7,000 employees on antibiotics."

The Postal Service started this past weekend in Lima, Ohio to irradiate the mail, said Day. "We've been working closely with the President's Office of Science and Technology to coordinate with other federal agencies to ensure that the level of irradiation that we're applying to this mail can give us a high degree of confidence that we're dealing with the threat," he said.

Pat Meehan, a CDC physician said results so far in the ongoing investigation "suggests to us that it's starting to look like non-governmental mail was minimally affected by this so far.

"As of this morning," Meehan said, "we continue to have 12 confirmed cases of anthrax; six suspect cases. And the good news is that there have been no new confirmed cases in the last

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The White House

Office of the Press Secretary

October 29, 2001

**Press Briefing By Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, Health And Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson, Cdc Emergency Environmental Services Director, Dr. Pat Meehan
Room 450 The Dwight D. Eisenhower
Executive Office Building
11:52 A.M. EST**

Governor Ridge: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to today's briefing on homeland security. One of the things that you'll note in the President's schedule today is that he will be meeting with the homeland security team, the principals, later on this afternoon.

You should know that during the past several weeks I have been meeting on a daily basis, along with individual members of the homeland security team, but we have begun to formalize that process. And even though the President has been in touch with us on a constant basis, we decided to formalize it. And we'll probably have some action items coming out of today's homeland security meeting, so stay tuned; we'll probably be back to you later on this afternoon.

The President has been conducting a 24-hour war on terrorism, not just with our troops located in Afghanistan, and with the eyes of this country toward Afghanistan, but it's been a 24-hour a day war on terrorism here in the United States. And there have been so many elements and so many agencies that have been involved in this process.

And what we intend to do in the days and the weeks ahead are to bring some of these major players to this briefing room from time to time on a regular basis to deal with the questions that you might have. As I said before, as we continue our round-the-clock war on terrorism at home, we think it's very appropriate to bring some of these principals together on a regular basis to respond to questions that you might have and, obviously, some questions that people in America have, as well.

Today, joining me from the Department of Health and Human Services is my friend and former colleague, Tommy Thompson. And he is joined by Dr. Pat Meehan, the Director of Emergency Environmental Services with the Center for Disease Control. And I've asked them to give you an update this morning.

Gentlemen.

Secretary Thompson: Thank you very much, Tom. And good morning to all the reporters here. I just would like to briefly update you on the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services. And currently, the Department of Health and Human Services has 575 individuals in the field, responding to acts of threats of bioterrorism. And these wonderful, dedicated employees are helping state and local officials in Washington and New York, New Jersey and Florida.

And as officials in these affected communities know, more resources and help are only a phone call away.

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doing our best to get help to those at risk of anthrax exposure as quickly as possible.

And we're also working as aggressively as we can to strengthen our response capabilities. We know we have to get stronger, and we're working with the Congress to ramp up as quickly as possible. Americans should know that we have the best scientists, the best doctors and bioterrorism experts in the country helping us in this endeavor. We're learning more each and every day, and we're becoming stronger each and every day. And we're going to keep working our hardest to tackle this new challenge facing our country. We are determined, and we will not be deterred in our efforts.

We appreciate the hard work and dedication of our partners at the state and local level, as well. And as the medical community, they're doing a good job of identifying cases that might be anthrax, so that precautionary measures can be taken, and that we might respond as quickly as possible.

We also have reached an agreement with all those individuals dealing with the flu vaccine, and it will be delivered on time, and we will have an increased amount of about 5 million doses. So we will have 85 million doses of vaccine for flu that will be sent out to the clinics and to the hospitals in the month of November, and hopefully all will be sent by the first week in December.

In regards to the most recent update on anthrax, the Cohen building has been presumptively positively tested for anthrax this past couple days, and all the individuals in the mail room are on antibiotics. And we are letting all the individuals know the mail rooms have been closed down. But presumptive positive means that the next -- the environmental testing will now go to the CDC labs in Atlanta, and that conclusion of those -- of that information will be sent back within the next 24 to 48 hours.

With that, I'd introduce Pat Meehan.

Dr. Meehan: Good morning. As of this morning, we continue to have 12 confirmed cases of anthrax; six suspect cases. And the good news is that there have been no new confirmed cases in the last couple of days. Although, I have to tell you that one of the suspect cases in New Jersey is of concern to us and could move to the confirmed category in the near future.

Thank you.

Governor Ridge: Now, our partners in the United States Postal Service continue to work, likewise, on a 24-hour pace to isolate, treat and remediate any and all contaminated sites. They are also working with as rapidly as possible to restore service to the affected areas and to clean up any mail that may have been contaminated.

The United States Postal Service had a difficult weekend, as they laid to rest two of their own members. A very difficult weekend for the family and the larger family, the Postal Service community. So we remember them in our prayers and, likewise, ask Tom Day, who is Vice President for Engineering, to join us, from the Postal Service, to give you an update.

MR. DAY: From the Postal Service standpoint, we have continued our downstream testing of facilities. In the D.C.-Baltimore area, we have over 6,000 employees on antibiotics; and in the New York-New Jersey area, nearly 7,000 employees on antibiotics.

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We've been working closely with the President's Office of Science and Technology to coordinate with other federal agencies to ensure that the level of irradiation that we're applying to this mail can give us a high degree of confidence that we're dealing with the threat.

We'll continue to work towards that and study it. The mail is a very -- various products that go through there, so it does not have the homogeneity that you might find in some of the testing that's been done with both food processing and medical sterility. And up to this point, that's where that type of technology has been used.

So we'll work closely with them. We've set a very high dose level that we believe gives a high degree of confidence. And we're also doing extensive quality assurance with the company that what they are applying does prove to be very effective.

Also with the same company, we have contracted for eight of those systems. We are looking to deploy them to facilities where we can then put the mail through and not have to transport it great distances outside of this area. And we're looking to get even more capacity, if possible, to increase the ability to irradiate mail.

Governor Ridge: Joining us today, as well, in case you have any questions -- I think some of you have been with us before when we've had Major General John Parker, Commanding General of the United States Army Medical Research and Materiel Command Center. But we also have Dr. John Marburger, the Science Advisor to the President, Office of Science and Technology Policy.

Any questions?

Question: Governor, let me ask you something. First it started out that the medicine of choice was Cipro. Then we heard doxycycline is also as effective. I want to ask you about, how about regular penicillin? Can anybody say? Are there three interchangeable --

Governor Ridge: I will defer to a medical expert to give you the answer on that.

Dr. Meehan.

Dr. Meehan: Generally, the two top drugs that we recommend are ciprofloxacin or another drug in that category, but specifically ciprofloxacin and doxycycline. After the organism is isolated and we do antibiotic sensitivities, we can ascertain, we can figure out if the particular organism is sensitive to a broad range or not. We tend to go to doxycycline because of the simpler dosing, and because that is what we have lots of in the national pharmaceutical stockpile and we can make it available to people readily for rapid implementation of treatment clinics.

What we have done is figured out that the isolates so far have entirely been sensitive to doxycycline, so that, essentially, ciprofloxacin and doxycycline are interchangeable.

Question: But penicillin does not have the same effect?

Dr. Meehan: Penicillin, I would need to look at the antibiotic sensitivity profile on these. Penicillin may work fine for these. I've only concentrated on those two because that's the two that we're offering on a regular basis to people.

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silicon in the sample of anthrax that was discovered at Senator Daschle's office?

Governor Ridge: With regard to the investigation surrounding the Brentwood Post Office and the one letter to Senator Daschle's office, the FBI has secured its own independent facility to run the mail that had been basically sequestered, after we discovered that they had -- there was anthrax contained in one letter. And they are in the process of investigating to determine whether or not there are additional letters.

With regard to your second question, I'm going to ask General Parker to give you an update. There is, just to give you -- there has been one test that has been completed, and other tests are being conducted. And I will let the General explain to you the science of both.

Major General Parker: Good morning. I won't go through what we already know. There seems to be a lot of questions about bentonite. I'm not sure where they're coming from, or their importance. But if you ask what is bentonite, it's a volcanic clay. And one of its principle ingredients is aluminum. And it varies in percentage of aluminum. And we have subjected the New York Post sample and the Daschle sample to very high energy x-ray studies, and I will say to you that we see no aluminum presence in the sample.

And, therefore, if you go back to the definition, MERK Index, the Internet, and geology centers all over this country, we can say that there is no bentonite in the New York Post sample or the Daschle sample.

Question: To follow up, what does that say about the level of sophistication, and obviously connected to that, the level of expertise needed to -- for something like this, if it doesn't have --

Major General Parker: Bentonite is a lubricant. That's all I know about it by reading, just like you read. It's a hydroscopic compound. I don't know what its significance is, and I've been asked to study the samples thoroughly, from A to Z, to know what's in the sample, what's the character of that anthrax, what its family lineage is, and what its antibiotic sensitivities are. And I feel very strongly that the scientific data that I'm giving to you this morning is all I know.

Question: Does that suggest then that there was no additive, there's been nothing in the spores to make them more -- or nothing added to the spores to make them more easily aerosolized?

Major General Parker: Complicated question. We do know that we found silica in the samples. Now, we don't know what that motive would be, or why it would be there, or anything. But there is silica in the samples. And that led us to be absolutely sure that there was no aluminum in the sample, because the combination of a silicate, plus aluminum, is sort of the major ingredients of bentonite.

But the significance is -- I don't know what the significance is.

Question: Is silica negatively charged, do you know?

Major General Parker: I don't know that. It would depend on what form it would be in. I suppose you could do all sorts of things with it.

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understand that, I'm not the expert. I hope there are people that could probably answer your question much more articulately.

Question: John, you've told us a bit about what's not in the Daschle anthrax. From your briefing the other day, could you update us on what you do know about the characteristics of this anthrax?

Major General Parker: May I repeat what I said? The Daschle sample is very fine and powdery. It appears that -- and I'm talking gross, looking at the specimen grossly, not under the microscope. The New York Post sample is very granular, by comparison. And when you look at the two samples under the microscope, the Daschle sample is very pure and densely compact with spores. And so is the New York Post sample, but not quite as dense -- I'm talking magnitudes of, you know, times 10 difference, maybe, between the density of the two samples. Both samples are densely populated with anthrax spores.

Question: I just thought in four days, you would have found out something new about it?

Major General Parker: There's not much more to learn about anthrax. You know, the spore, itself, has been around a long, long time. It dates back into biblical times; we know it's not a good organism to have in your body.

Question: Would further tests show whether bentonite was there? Ari earlier suggested there may be other tests would identify it. Does this, what you're doing rule out bentonite, in your opinion?

Major General Parker: Sir, in my opinion, it rules it out. If I can't find aluminum, I can't say it's bentonite.

Question: Will there be other ways to look for the composition of this additive? Are there other ways, aside from high energy x-rays, to go about looking for --

Major General Parker: The scientists are pursuing that, they're discussing it and are trying to characterize this right down to the point where we know everything about these samples. But you have to know that we don't have much sample, and so doing comparison is very, very difficult and people have to think about it before we destroy more sample to maybe run down a wrong road. So there's a lot of discussion about what is needed.

Question: And in that discussion, is there essentially a debate as to whether or not this additive indicates a foreign source, or whether or not this additive indicates a domestic --

Major General Parker: Sir, I'm not aware of a debate. I'm not aware of a debate.

Question: Governor Ridge, I have another question. You can refer it out as you see appropriate. The issue of a second letter you've already spoken to. What is the latest theory as to the nature of these additional hot spots within the Brentwood facility, and how cross-contamination might have occurred? In other words, is other mail affected that's now being sterilized as a precaution? Or -- and all going to the point of whether or not there's mail arriving at people's home, particular in this city, that might somehow be tainted?

Governor Ridge: The belief within the administration is that we need to isolate all the mail that was on the Hill to determine whether there was more than one letter, and that process is

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dealing with people who may have been exposed to it.

The belief within the administration is to basically leave no stone un-turned. There will be additional tests on the remaining anthrax samples that we have. They're going to be looking at the letters at another facility, at another venue. This is -- it continues to be a very aggressive, ongoing investigation. There are a lot of theories out there; we just need some facts to turn a theory into reality.

Question: Can I follow on one point? In other words, what I'm asking is almost mechanically, what would happen -- in other words, if nobody within Daschle's office got the inhaled form of anthrax, is that because once it aerosolizes, your biggest hot spot is going to be within the processing center or where it's going through various equipment, and so forth?

Governor Ridge: It seems to me that the inhalation anthrax that took the lives of a couple postal workers came at a point where there was obviously maximum exposure. What caused it, whether or not it was spraying the strappers with -- again, it's an investigation dealing with, frankly, perhaps a universe of unknowns that we're trying to narrow down. But I would ask any of my colleagues -- Dr. Meehan or Mr. Day, if you care to elaborate on that.

Dr. Meehan: I'd be happy to, Governor Ridge. At this point, the epidemiologic data point to a situation where the Daschle letter probably went through the Brentwood facility, was processed by a machine, some aerosolization occurred of the spores. The people who were working in the facility were exposed to aerosolized spores, and developed inhalation anthrax.

We think -- we believe very strongly that people that live -- the individuals who receive mail in the Washington, D.C. area, are at extremely -- are essentially at no risk of inhalation anthrax. They are not in a situation where they're going to be agitating letters that have spores. If there's a remote possibility that a letter has a few spores on it, because it was in the Brentwood facility at the same time, those people may have a very, very small risk of cutaneous type anthrax.

But it's important to remember that we're doing very aggressive surveillance and case finding, working with Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., and have seen no cases of this so far. So it makes us feel good that people are really at essentially --

Question: But are you also in touch with large businesses, say in downtown Washington, that may get mail in bulk from Brentwood -- law firms, other --

Dr. Meehan: We have recommended that their mail handlers, the ones that get mail -- in the rooms that get mail directly from Brentwood, be on preventive therapy right now. But let me tell you that having tested now -- having results back from -- I believe it's 22 post offices where non-governmental mail was going through -- out of almost 300 samples, we only have one positive. And that suggests to us that it's starting to look like non-governmental mail was minimally affected by this so far.

Question: Governor Ridge, what accounts for the positive hits at these off site facilities, like the CIA, at the State Department, the Supreme Court? Is it additional contaminated

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theory is cross-contamination. But, again, you don't eliminate anything at this point. Does anybody care to respond to that?

Dr. Meehan: I'm sorry, could you restate the question?

Question: The contamination at some of these off-site mail facilities that service the Justice Department, the Supreme Court -- what's the working theory on that, is it that it's cross-contamination --

Dr. Meehan: We think probably in most cases it's mail that was processed at the same time as the Daschle letter, that was cross-contaminated by it.

Question: Doctor, in that regard, we have been using the terminology "hot spots." And I'm wondering if you could comparatively tell us how hot or not hot some of these places are? I mean, are we talking about very, very small spore samples that are of almost no particular danger at some of these off site facilities, and we should sort of think of them in a different way than all being hot spots?

Dr. Meehan: Right. It's important to realize that these are facilities where we're taking wipe samples. So these are spores that are on the surfaces of things. It's highly unlikely that they would be re-aerosolized in sufficient quantity to cause anybody to get inhalation anthrax. So our level of concern is quite low, but we still want people to be taking antibiotics.

Question: On a follow up, could you talk about the CDC recommendation on Friday that some high risk workers begin, at some point when it's available, to receive the anthrax vaccination? Be these contamination workers, others who are working in mail facilities in investigatory capacity, and at some point possibly postal workers?

Dr. Meehan: I'm sorry, what is the question?

Question: Well, can you talk about why that's necessary, when the vaccine will be available, what will be the methods to work that out?

Dr. Meehan: Those are some very preliminary discussions that are going on right now, looking at if we were to expand vaccine availability, if we were to recommend that, which groups would we recommend it for. And as -- I believe it was Dr. Fleming, from CDC, said, those are the initial groups that we would certainly look at.

Question: But you're saying that's not a final determination yet?

Dr. Meehan: No, sir.

Question: That's not a policy. Can you stand on that, Secretary Thompson?

Secretary Thompson: It's not final. It's very preliminary -- it's being discussed, and it's not final in any way.

Question: I just wanted to clarify. You mentioned the Cohen room.

Secretary Thompson: The Cohen Building.

Question: Or, building, rather. Is that a new site, or -- I mean, is that --

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Secretary Thompson: Sorry?

Question: What is that building?

Secretary Thompson: It's the Health and Human Service Building, right next to the Humphrey Building. There's a lot of -- Voice of America is in there, Food and Drug is in there, and some of our other --

Question: There was a report this morning that there had been a possible anthrax at the State Department. Is that accurate?

Secretary Thompson: That, I don't know about. All I know is about the Cohen Building.

Governor Ridge: That report about the State Department I believe is accurate.

Question: Main building?

Governor Ridge: Main building, I'm not sure. But it is.

Question: Will you be briefing like this every day or Monday, Wednesday and Friday? What are your plans?

Governor Ridge: Well, at least Monday, Wednesday and Friday. But as -- again, there's probably a pretty good chance you will see us tomorrow, because we found a new site in the Cohen Building. We anticipate you'll want to know more about that. So I suspect that throughout this week, you will probably see us daily. It may not always be at 11:00 a.m., but right now, tentatively 11:00 a.m.

Question: And the whole lineup?

Governor Ridge: That may vary from time to time, depending on the information that we gain over the next 24 hours, as it relates to either the Post Office, CDC. It's an interchangeable lineup. Everybody's on the same team. We just don't bring the entire team at the same time.

Question: Is this in response to some of the criticism that the administration received last week, that it was -- had a very ragged response to the anthrax and homeland security?

Governor Ridge: Actually, if you recall the first press conference that I think we held over a week ago, we brought out -- we've taken the same approach, and we're going to continue to take the same approach, with me speaking much less on matters of science and medicine and bringing the experts along with me.

That's it. Thank you very much.

End 12:20 P.M. EST

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