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Chem-Bio News

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CB Daily Report

Chem-Bio News

IN ATTICS AND CLOSETS, 'BIOHACKERS' DISCOVER THEIR INNER FRANKENSTEIN

By Jeanne Whalen
The Wall Street Journal
May 12, 2009

"Using Mail-Order DNA and Iguana Heaters, Hobbyists Brew New Life Forms; Is It Risky?"

"In Massachusetts, a young woman makes genetically modified E. coli in a closet she converted into a home lab. A part-time DJ in Berkeley, Calif., works in his attic to cultivate viruses extracted from sewage. In Seattle, a grad-school dropout wants to breed algae in a personal biology lab.

These hobbyists represent a growing strain of geekdom known as biohacking, in which do-it-yourselfers tinker with the building blocks of life in the comfort of their own homes. Some of them buy DNA online, then fiddle with it in hopes of curing diseases or finding new biofuels."

"Previously, some researchers and law-enforcement officials have raised red flags. In a paper published in Nature Biotechnology in 2007, a group of scientists and FBI officials called for better oversight of so-called synthetic DNA, an ingredient widely used by professional biologists and hobbyists, saying it could theoretically lead to the creation of harmful viruses like Ebola or smallpox, since their genomes are available online. "Current government oversight of the DNA-synthesis industry falls short of addressing this unfortunate reality," the paper said.

Ms. Aull, who lives with a cat and three roommates who are "a little bit weirded out" by her experiments, says the worries are overblown. DIY biologists are trying to "build a slingshot," she says, "and there are people out there talking about, oh, no, what happens if they move on to nuclear weapons?"

So far, most garage biologists playing around with synthetic DNA are simply adding a gene or two to an existing organism, a fairly standard scientific practice involving some test-tube mixing, and not something biosecurity experts are very worried about. But technology promises to allow the creation of entire organisms from scratch -- something academics are aiming to do in university labs -- and that has some experts worried.

A senior official in the FBI's Weapons of Mass Destruction Directorate says the bureau is working with academia and industry to raise awareness about biosecurity, "particularly in light of the expansion of affordable molecular biology equipment" and genetic databases.

George Church, a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School, says anyone using synthetic DNA should have to have a license, including garage biologists. But he says he's not too concerned by the current home hobbyists. "The younger generation need something they feel they can do, in the same sense that my generation was inspired by NASA and home chemistry kits," he said."

The full article can be found at:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124207326903607931.html#mod=article-outset-box>

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TALEBAN USING WHITE PHOSPHORUS, SOME OF IT MADE IN BRITAIN

By Michael Evans

The Times (UK)

May 12, 2009

"Taleban fighters have been using deadly white phosphorus munitions, some of them manufactured in Britain, to attack Western forces in Afghanistan, according to previously classified United States documents released yesterday.

White phosphorus, which can burn its victims down to the bone, has been found in improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in regions across Afghanistan including in the south, where British troops are based. It has also been used in mortar and rocket attacks on American forces."

Although a full investigation is under way, it is not yet clear how the Taleban and other insurgent forces using them had acquired the white phosphorus munitions from Britain. However, Major Willis said that Afghanistan was littered with ordnance of every kind and it was not a surprise that the insurgents had got their hands on white phosphorus.

The US military said that the Taleban had found white phosphorus rounds left over from the war with the Soviet Union in the 1980s. But there were newer models which, it is suspected, had been smuggled across the border from Pakistan.

Major Willis said that the use of white phosphorus in IEDs was a relatively new development. The earliest report of the insurgents using white phosphorus was in February 2003, but the eight known IED cases, including one in the south, have all occurred since March 2007."

The full article can be found at: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6269646.ece>

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MAN HAD 'ENOUGH URANIUM FOR BOMB'

By Steve Butcher

The Age (AU)

May 09, 2009

"A VICTORIAN man who was arrested and charged last month with serious drug offences held enough

uranium at a storage facility to make a "dirty bomb".

The Melbourne Magistrates Court heard yesterday that investigators found the uranium oxide powder at Harcourt, outside Castlemaine, along with drug equipment and a confidential police document.

It was alleged by a detective that Andrew John McNaughton, 45, became a target of the police Petra taskforce in December after "intelligence indicated that he was involved in police corruption by way of sourcing and distributing restricted confidential Victoria Police information".

The court heard that an explosives expert found that the uranium could be used in the "construction" of a dirty bomb and that other chemicals for drug manufacture could in combination make an "incendiary device".

Detective Sergeant Peter Kos said in evidence that the uranium was "depleted" and only dangerous if ingested."

The full article can be found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/man-had-enough-uranium-for-bomb-20090508-ay10.html>

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GIRLS TARGETED IN 'TALIBAN GAS ATTACK'

By Jerome Starkey
The Independent (UK)
May 13, 2009

"They were among 90 Afghan school girls rushed to hospital yesterday unconscious and vomiting, possibly victims of a gas poisoning attack on their school in Mahmud Raqi village."

"Of the 90 girls from the Qazaam school admitted to hospital, at least five slipped briefly into comas, officials in Kapisa province, north-east of the capital, said. Six teachers and at least two other staff were also admitted."

"It was the third such attack against a girls' school in Afghanistan in as many weeks, raising fears that the Taliban are resorting to increasingly vicious methods to terrorise young women out of education. Police officials blamed Taliban sympathisers but the insurgents' spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid denied any involvement. "Harming children is not the work of holy warriors," he said. "We absolutely reject this."

Gulcheena described the gas smelling like a chemical known locally as Mallatin, which farmers sometimes spread on fields to poison foraging birds. The provincial police chief, Matiullah Safi, said none of the students, teachers or support staff had seen anything suspicious. "It looks like something was sprayed in the school but so far no one has been arrested," he said. "There's no proof, at the moment, that this was an attack."

But the alleged poisoning comes just days after girls at a school in nearby Charikar, on the road north of Kabul, complained of similar symptoms."

".....Dr Abdul Mateen said most of the patients were suffering from vomiting, nausea and dizziness. "We don't have the equipment here to do a full diagnosis," Dr Mateen said. Blood samples were being sent for analysis to the US base at Bagram."

The full article can be found at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/girls-targeted-in-taliban-gas-attack-1684028.html>

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ARMY CONTRACTS FOR JBPDS TECHNOLOGY

UPI.com

May 07, 2009

“General Dynamics (NYSE:GD) has been contracted by the U.S. Army to provide its Joint Biological Point Detection Systems.

U.S. company General Dynamics said its North Carolina-based Armament and Technical Products unit was awarded the contract from the Army Research, Development and Engineering Command Acquisition Center in Maryland.

Under the \$34 million deal, General Dynamics will produce, test and provide field support for its JBPDS, a joint service program for the Army, Navy and Air Force. Officials said the JBPDS detects biological-warfare agents, protecting troops during deployments.”

The full article can be found at: http://www.upi.com/Security_Industry/2009/05/07/Army-contracts-for-JBPDS-technology/UPI-54331241724458/

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NICOTINE MAY PREVENT BIOTERRORISM DAMAGE

UPI.com

May 06, 2009

“British scientists say they've determined nicotine can delay the effects of ricin used during a bioterrorism attack.

Jon Mabley and his colleagues at the University of Brighton found nicotine works to block the tissue-destroying effects of ricin -- a highly toxic compound derived from castor beans. The study was conducted in laboratory models, but the scientists said nicotine agonists could potentially be used in patients exposed to ricin as a stopgap measure before other treatments take effect.”

The full article can be found at: http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2009/05/06/Nicotine-may-prevent-bioterrorism-damage/UPI-56861241630359/

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