

Deadly Viruses

Disease Lab 'Leak' Reported

New York

On a June afternoon in 1970, two cars collided at the junction of two roads that cross flat potato fields near Riverhead, a town on the eastern part of Long Island. One car was driven off the road and overturned. Its driver died a few hours later in a hospital.

The accident would have been entirely routine but for the identity of the fatally injured driver and the box he was carrying. The injured man, Alfred Von Hassel, was an employee of the Plum Island Animal Disease Laboratory. A container was in the back seat of the wreck. It contained "biologicals," still unidentified, intended for experimental work at the island lab.

Someone called Plum Island to notify the laboratory officials that Von Hassel had been in an accident. Shortly thereafter, another Plum Island employee appeared at the scene and claimed the box of biological materials.

Plum Island is a mile and a quarter off Orient Point, the eastern tip of Long Island. Its 338 employees work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture in research on animal diseases.

A Newsday investigation found that Von Hassel's trip was only one of thousands that have been made back and forth across Long Island with biological materials, including live viruses, by couriers since the Plum Island lab went into operation in 1954. The trips have gone unnoticed; the Suffolk County Health Department says it knows nothing about Plum Island or the traffic in biological materials.

Similarly, the work done at Plum Island, established by law to perform research on foreign animal diseases to protect the United States from possible epidemics, has been free from scrutiny, although not from speculation that biological or chemical weapons have been developed on the island.

The Newsday investigation, which paralleled one by the office of Democratic State Representative Thomas Downey, found that:

- Plum Island maintains contacts with the U.S. military and continues to experiment with and store viruses that could infect humans.

- Although Plum Island offi-

cialists say that no military funds are used there, the island laboratory apparently still operates under an agreement that binds it to the Army and has contracts that link it to the Naval Biosciences Laboratory in Oakland, Calif. The Oakland lab had been the Navy's chief biological warfare workshop, equivalent to the Army's chemical and biological warfare installation at Fort Detrick, Mo.

- Plum Island is engaged in research on human diseases, including influenza and sub-acute sclerosing panencephalitis, a deadly form of measles. Published information about the influenza research was omitted from a list of scientific articles provided by the laboratory in response to a request. Plum Island officials pointed out that the research was necessary because human diseases are related to animal diseases.

- Biological materials en route to the island have been transported across Long Island in the back seats of cars driven by men who in most cases did not know what they were carrying. On many occasions, the materials were transferred from one car to another in an area shopping center parking lot.

- The stated policy of Plum Island is that nothing that enters the labs ever leaves the island. Newsday found, however, that biological materials had indeed been shipped from the island. Officials said later that only vaccines had left, but in one instance Newsday found that live virus of a virulent disease of ducks had been sent by car to a research lab in Eastport, N.Y.

Plum Island's officials have continually denied that any work on biological warfare is done there. Dr. John Graves, the island's assistant director, acknowledged that the island had "the research capability and competence" for defensive biological warfare, but said that "no Defense (Department) money is coming in here."

Much of the research done on the island could be applied to biological warfare, however, simply because animal diseases could be potent weapons for any nation that decided to use biological weapons. "If you want to use BW (biological warfare), you would be much better striking at livestock, said one scientist who had worked on top-secret biological weapons. "If you use

nerve gas on an army, you just kill the soldiers. If you destroy or damage a country's food supply, you strike at everyone." The possibilities of such weapons were recognized by the CIA, which in 1967 asked the Army to study biological weapons for use against crops and animals.

The Army, in a recent letter to Representative Downey, said that (since 1954) "there has been a cooperative effort between (Army and Agriculture) in this area . . . Liaison was maintained at the working level between a number of individuals in the Department of Agriculture and the Army's Ford Detrick laboratories." The Army supplied the names of 17 Army employees who worked on or who were connected with Plum Island between 1950 and the present. The island's current safety director, in charge of security, is Jerry S. Walker, who resigned his Army major's commission last spring and left a post as a researcher at Fort Detrick to work at Plum Island.

Plum Island also has a contractual relationship with the Naval Biosciences Laboratory in Oakland, to study a viral disease that affects marine mammals, such as seals. That lab was built and equipped by the Navy and is operated by the University of California under contract from the Navy.

Agriculture Department records indicate shipment of materials from both Fort Detrick and the naval lab to Plum Island.

The accident in Riverhead that took courier Von Hassel's life raises questions about the system used to transport material to and from Plum Island. Most of the traffic is between Plum Island and Kennedy Airport, since much of the material sent to the island is shipped by commercial airliner.

As Von Hassel was being taken to a hospital, where he died a few

hours later, an off-duty guard was called by Agriculture Department officials on the island and quickly dispatched to the accident scene, according to sources familiar with the incident.

The off-duty guard, Leo Golisz identified himself to police at the scene, retrieved the container and went back to the island.

Golisz, however, denies he was summoned to the scene. He says he passed the accident by chance and recognized the car because of its government markings. He told Newsday recently that he did not know what was in the container and did not ask. Today, more than six years later, its contents remain a mystery.

Graves said that no records are kept on what an individual courier

brings to the island on a given day. From what records he could find, Graves said, it appeared that Von Hassel probably was carrying antelope tissue from the Catskill Game Farm, but he could not be sure. USDA records in Washington show that at about the same time, the island received viral strains of bovine epizootic fever, a disease affecting cattle.

Because of the nature of their work, Plum Island researchers receive materials from all over the world, including live virus and tissue cultures. Getting them to the island from Kennedy Airport is done under less than optimum conditions, according to some employees who asked not to be identified.

Use of commercial passenger aircraft for transporting biological materials has long been a concern

of the Airline Pilots Association. According to Captain James Eckols, who heads the association's dangerous substances committee, there has, however, been little concern about materials traveling under permit from the Agriculture Department, as all shipments to and from Plum Island do. "Our main problem has been with individual veterinarians, who will sometimes cut off a dog's head, pack it in ice, and put it on an airplane to some lab," Eckols said. Agriculture Department regulations on packing and labeling are adequate from his association's viewpoint, he said.

Some of the material that travels across Long Island gets no closer to Plum Island than a freezer located in a building at the island's ferry dock in Orient Point. In most cases, that involves material arriving from overseas and destined for other scientific facilities elsewhere in the United States. Plum Island takes samples from the shipments, tests them on the island for contamination by foreign animal diseases, then either releases the shipment or orders it destroyed.

Graves said in an interview that the transportation of materials across Long Island, including viruses that could affect humans, poses no threat to human or animal life and was basically a sound and workable system.

A spokesman for the Suffolk Health Department said that it had no jurisdiction over Plum Island or any other federal facility and therefore knew nothing about the island's activities. Asked if the island officials ever consulted the department about transporting materials through the county, the spokesman said, "We know nothing about what goes on there."

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