

Anthrax Opinion Disserves Troops, By Thomas L. Rempfer

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Defense Sec. William Cohen's letter ["Anthrax editorial did a 'disservice' to troops," July 19], criticized the newspaper's editorial on the anthrax vaccination program. The editorial, wrote Cohen, "may have been well-intentioned and designed to benefit men and women in uniform. In truth, the argument does them a significant disservice."

As an Air Force reserve officer, I testified March 24 before the House Government Reform national security subcommittee. My goal was to challenge the anthrax program on the facade of the force protection it pretends to provide. I hope we anticipate the challenges ahead as dozens of additional vaccines appear on the battlefield, and weigh their implications on service member's health rights. My testimony occurred after I exhausted all avenues within my chain of command.

The foundations of the anthrax vaccination program, which the defense secretary mandated in a May 18, 1998, memorandum, are flawed. This program was to begin only after the successful completion of four prerequisites: supplemental testing of the vaccine assured tracking of the immunizations; approved operational and communications plans and review of the health and medical aspects of the program by an independent expert. Each of these preconditions requires review because of vaccine refusals and their impact on readiness.

The first requirement - supplemental testing - was terminated based on an "inconsistency," according to Brig. Gen. Eddie Cain's April 29 testimony before the subcommittee. Cain is the manager of the Joint Program Office for Biological Defense.

The second requirement - assured tracking of the immunizations - was criticized as "passive" during testimony to Congress by Kwai Chan, director of special studies and evaluations, National Security and International Affairs Division of the General Accounting Office.

The third requirement - approved operational and communications plans - is in question as well. Chan's testimony that "the long-term safety of the vaccine has not yet been studied," corresponds to a belated acknowledgment by the director of the anthrax program that there is a need to analyze the vaccine's long-term impact on service members' health. This admission, along with Defense Department acknowledgment that veterinarians have not routinely used the vaccine outside of military laboratories, cast doubt on the accuracy of DoD's communications campaign.

The final requirement - review of the health and medical aspects of the program by an independent expert - was shot down when the "expert" submitted a letter in lieu of testimony before the subcommittee. Dr. Gerard N. Burrow wrote, "The Department of Defense was looking for some (sic) to review the program in general and make suggestions, and I accepted out of patriotism. I was very clear that I had no expertise in anthrax, and they were very clear that they were looking for general oversight of the vaccination program."

I am pleased Cohen responded. By encouraging dialogue in Congress and within the ranks, we will find the best force protection for the men and women who serve. The Air Force Surgeon General has described the anthrax vaccine as "body armor," but the question is, how many layers underneath the skin are required to realistically protect the troops?

Vaccine development within the Joint Vaccine Acquisition Program is ongoing for other threats, including plague, encephalitis, tularemia, botulism and a list of more than a dozen other known biological warfare agents.

Vaccines may not be right for the military when its enemies use different pathogens or mutated strains to nullify troops' protection. Service members will suffer, long after the current defense leadership is gone, if decisions are rushed. America's troops are worthy of a thorough and genuine review process to determine the right answers to crucial questions. Our nation's children will be left to deal with the effects of the doctrinal shift that vaccinating against biological weapons represents.

This issue is about "good order and discipline" - as senior military officials maintain - because a breakdown is now occurring as a result of this questionable order.

Despite Secretary Cohen's claim that "wearing helmets in battle isn't voluntary because everybody needs protection," the anthrax vaccine is not body armor.

Instead, it is an expedient tactical fix to a strategic doctrinal military dilemma. Safety and effectiveness are debatable, and several top biological-warfare experts contend that vaccines are a mistake.

If so, this mistake has already occurred 1 million times.

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