

## Experts endorse anthrax vaccine

WASHINGTON (AP) — A panel of scientists on Wednesday endorsed the safety and effectiveness of the anthrax vaccine, but also recommended research into improving it.

Last year's anthrax-by-mail attacks focused additional attention on the vaccine, already criticized by some military members who resigned rather than take it because of concerns about side effects.

The study by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine concluded that the vaccine protects against all forms of anthrax and has no more serious side effects than other vaccines given to adults.

"The anthrax vaccine should protect against even the inhalational form of the infection, but the lengthy vaccination schedule and the way the shots are physically administered make it far from optimal," said Brian L. Strom, chairperson of the committee that reviewed the vaccine.

The committee urged the Defense Department to support research into a better vaccine.

The vaccine was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in 1970. The manufacturer, BioPort Corp., took over the product in 1998, but not until February did it win FDA approval for full production.

After the anthrax attacks, many postal workers and Senate employees were given protective antibiotics in case they had been exposed to anthrax. When those

workers finished the first 60 days of antibiotics, medical experts suggested they continue those drugs, add vaccinations or end treatment. Most opted to avoid the vaccine.

Asked if he would have recommended they take the vaccine, Strom said the answer would be yes, if he had known then what he does now.

"The anthrax vaccine should protect against even the inhalational form of the infection..."

— Brian L. Strom  
Chairperson  
Anthrax Vaccine Committee

Bob Kramer, president of BioPort, said he is pleased that "once again the safety and efficacy of the vaccine has been confirmed."

The report was also welcomed by the Pentagon.

"This peer-reviewed report ... offers confirmation that the department uses a protective measure that works for those at risk of exposure to the lethal agent anthrax," said Dr. William Winkenwerder Jr., assistant secretary of defense for health affairs.

But Steve Robinson of the National Gulf War Resource Center, said he will press the Defense Department to establish a mandatory compensation program for anyone who has a serious reaction to the vaccine.

The report said the rate of reactions was similar to that of other vaccines, such as tetanus, that were given to adults. These included skin redness, occasional malaise and muscle pain but no serious health impairments, the report said.

There were also reports of itching or swelling at the injection site — possibly because the vaccine is injected under the skin rather than into muscle, as is the case for most vaccines, the study said.

There is only limited information about possible long-term effects, the report noted, but there are no indications of increased risks.

But the vaccine is manufactured using older technology and requires six shots plus an annual booster, something the committee felt should be improved.

"The most prudent course of action is to develop a new vaccine — given the nation's war against terrorism and the domestic attacks where anthrax was used as a deadly weapon," said Strom, director of the Center for Clinical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at the University of Pennsylvania.

The current vaccine has been used to protect veterinarians and others who work with animals.

## Restrictions on genetically engineered fish

SACRAMENTO (AP) — California may impose the nation's toughest restrictions on genetically engineered salmon, even before the federal government decides if it should be the first transgenic animal approved for human consumption.

Measures restricting the sale or production of the fish are pending in both state Legislative chambers, though the nearest salmon farming is in Washington's Puget Sound because conditions in California are not suitable.

Fishermen and environmental groups say genetically engineered salmon that escape from their enclosures could harm the West Coast's already dwindling native populations.

They cite studies by Purdue University and others showing that so-called "superfish" — altered to grow larger and faster — could have a competi-

tive advantage for food, mates and habitat.

But Joseph McGonigle, vice president of Waltham, Mass.-based Aqua Bounty Farms Inc., said that is not possible since only sterile females would be used. Unlike sterile males, escapees would not attempt to go to river breeding grounds and spawn so there would be no behavioral competition.

McGonigle's company, which has transplanted a gene that makes salmon grow to full size in half the usual time, has been trying to get Food and Drug Administration approval for its fish since 1996. He said the FDA should be ready to decide by 2004.

A bill pending in the California Senate would be the nation's toughest, banning the import, transport, possession or release of transgenic fish in the state, with violators fined up to \$50,000.



### Hatching controversy

The federal government is expected to decide by 2004 whether genetically modified fish are suitable for human consumption. But opponents say "superfish" farms pose a more present threat — to the environment.

**The appeal**  
By introducing a growth gene into Atlantic salmon eggs, farmers can breed larger salmon that reach market weight 6 to 12 months sooner than normal salmon.

SOURCES: Food and Drug Administration; Associated Press

**The concern**  
Environmentalists say transgenic salmon that escape from areas where they're bred could threaten wild salmon populations because they would have a competitive advantage in feeding and mating.

### Searching for solutions

▶ A Massachusetts-based hatchery says it only breeds sterile females that would not pose a competitive threat if any escaped because they would not attempt to spawn.  
▶ A Maryland law passed last year requires that transgenic fish farms be in a pond or lake that that doesn't flow into an open body of water.

### NEWS IN BRIEF

#### Adult stem cells show promise in tissue research

AP — Researchers have found evidence that stem cells circulating in the bloodstream can grow new tissue in the liver, gut and skin.

The study is the latest to suggest the versatility of adult stem cells, the body's manufac-

turing equipment for new tissue. In adults — unlike in embryos — they have long been thought to be programmed to make just one kind of cell, such as liver or brain, depending on where they are located.

Stem cells found in the bone marrow were once believed to make only new blood cells. But recent studies have upset this dogma, finding that they apparently develop into a

variety of cells throughout the body.

Stem cells in the blood are virtually identical to the bone marrow variety. The latest work, published in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, suggests they can morph into many different kinds of tissue.

The finding boosts scientists' hopes of one day using stem cells to repair injuries and treat diseases.

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