Cataract University vows to fix lab problems

Sep 1, 2009 (News) – The head of Cataract University today promised a vigorous effort to correct safety infractions uncovered by federal investigators in the university’s laboratory and voiced a hope that research at the lab can resume by the end of this year.

Cloud Foster, the school’s interim president, responded for the first time today to a report from the National Biosafety Inspector (NBI) that detailed a long list of safety violations at the lab.

Meanwhile, information about more problems at the lab emerged from documents released yesterday by the university.

On July 6, the NBI released a report of an investigation that was prompted by three instances of workers who were infected by or exposed to two dangerous biological agents. In one incident, a woman was infected with Brucella after cleaning an aerosol chamber; in another, three workers were exposed to Coxiella burnetti. The three incidents were first uncovered by an external safety watch group.

The NBI suspended the lab's research on dangerous biological agents in June when the watch group exposed the safety violations it found through its freedom-of-information requests. In releasing its inspection report, the NBI said the ban would remain in effect until the university corrects the safety problems, and the lab clears another NBI inspection. The school could also face penalties from the Ministry of Health (MOH), which has funded the lab.

At a news teleconference today, President Foster said the university had spent the last two days reviewing the NBI report to make sure that the school's plans to remedy the problems are consistent with the investigators' findings.

"First, we are grateful to the NBI for providing this comprehensive view of the steps necessary to rebuild our dangerous biological agent research program," Foster said. "We will use it as our road map to full compliance."

He reiterated that the university has already begun to correct the problems, and has brought in outside experts to help with the process. "This will continue at full speed until we have achieved compliance," he said. "We will be reporting back to the NBI in a matter of days," Foster said, adding that he hopes NBI investigators will return for another site visit this fall, and that work at the lab can resume by the end of the year.

Foster said he wasn't surprised by anything in the NBI report, because the investigation team shared many of its findings at an exit conference during the July site visit.

The myriad safety problems at the lab probably stemmed from an inadequate level of expertise in the lab, he said. "And we're putting that in place," he said.

Two university officials have recently resigned in the wake of revelations of the lab's safety problems. Adam Fakes, who supervised lab and infectious disease inspections in the universities' environmental health and safety department, stepped down on July 31, according to an Associated Press (AP) report today. Soon after the inspectors’ visit, Miriam Founder, the university's vice president for research, resigned from her post, the AP report said.

Foster said an investigation is ongoing into one of the report's findings—that three vials of dangerous biological agents were missing. "We've received no information that this is anything other than an inventory issue," he said, noting that the lab typically has 35,000 vials of dangerous biological agents in its inventory.

To address some of the lab security concerns NBI investigators raised, Foster said, the university has installed swipe-card systems and video cameras.

In related developments, the university released several more documents to the watch group yesterday, totalling 3,862 pages. Some of the documents, which are available on the external watch group's Web site, mention that flooding occurred at the facility on Feb 22, but a damage inspection was not completed until two months later.
At the press conference, Foster said he was not aware of the flooding and damage at the lab.

The documents also contain an April 2004 report of another lab worker who was exposed to *Brucella*, and it doesn't appear the incident was reported to the NBI. The worker was a graduate student who accidentally injected her hand with the agent, the documents show. She immediately saw a doctor and received antibiotic treatment.

However, at the press conference, Foster said he wasn't aware of any infected or exposed lab workers other than the four incidents that were reported earlier.

The documents state that the 2004 incident occurred before the university had developed clear procedures for reporting, investigating, and monitoring lab accidents, and that such procedures are now in place and employees are trained how to properly respond.

Foster said that though issues relating to the lab's safety infractions have been difficult for the university, he hoped some good would come of the revelations and remedies, such as improvements in the NBI's inspections of all the biosafety labs under its jurisdiction. "An outcome is that our lab will become a model program for work with dangerous biological agents," he said.

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