

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Forensic Aspects of Chemical and Biological Terrorism*

REFERENCE: Wecht CH, editor. Forensic aspects of chemical and biological terrorism, Lawyers & Judges Publishing Company, Tucson, AZ, 2004, 489 pp.

The continuing threat of global terrorism has become a reality for western civilization. Although sporadic terrorist attacks against Americans have occurred for decades, events in recent years have highlighted the vulnerability of this country. Since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Americans have been acutely aware of the likelihood of further attacks. The possibility of bioterrorism also became a reality in 2001, when five Americans were killed and twelve others became ill due to anthrax apparently received through the U.S. mail system. Although terrorists formerly relied on conventional explosives and weapons, we must now be prepared for chemical and biological weapons. In this comprehensive reference book, Dr. Cyril H. Wecht M.D., J.D., draws upon the expertise of national and international experts from many specialties related to chemical and biological terrorism.

This well written volume addresses topics important to many areas of medicine, law enforcement, public health, law and ethics. The book is divided into seventeen chapters, with sections allowing easy reference for particular topics. The first part of the book provides an overview of infectious agents of bioterrorism and the pathologic sequelae of these agents, of great importance to physicians who may not have had previous experience with the diseases caused by these agents. These chapters are very comprehensive and informative, although color photographs of the skin lesions would have enhanced them. A drawback to this part of the book is that there is considerable repetitive overlap between these chapters, particularly on the topic of smallpox.

Chapters on terrorist bombings address the recognition and management of blast-related injuries. Although somewhat beyond the scope of chemical and biological terrorism, this chapter provides important information to physicians addressing injuries derived from conventional weapons employed by terrorists. Chemical warfare agents and their sequelae and the laboratory methods used in their identification follow. Although these chapters provide a wealth of information, there is again significant overlap.

Subsequent chapters address measures needed for the medical, public health and law enforcement systems to prepare for the possibility of a chemical or biological weapons attack and to respond to such terrorism. Surveillance, laboratory capabilities and education and training are addressed. A chemical or biological terrorist attack would overwhelm our current resources. The surveillance systems needed to detect illnesses or deaths by such agents are under development. The responsibilities and authority of the various agencies involved in data sharing and decision-making are discussed, as are strategies for strengthening local medical systems to create better detection and response capabilities. The importance of the medical examiner and coroner systems and the recognition of possible terrorist attacks are stressed. An important chapter, a joint collaboration between the CDC and the National Association of Medical Examiners, describes the relationship between these offices and other agencies in preparing for and responding to chemical or biological attacks. A subsequent chapter provides modifications of standard crime scene procedures to include the specific challenges provided by chemical and biological weapons, such as the need for establishing zones for containment and decontamination. The specific concerns of detecting and responding to terrorist attacks at transportation facilities, which would affect not only local populations but also the global economy, are highlighted.

Eye opening insights into the psychology of terrorist leaders and terrorist followers are illustrated in a chapter that explores the psychopathology and ideology at the root of terrorist attacks. The mass media is discussed as being an essential ingredient to terrorism.

The legal and ethical considerations of a terrorist attack and the potential conflict between the public good and individual liberties illustrate the current lack of preparedness and the need for legal reform. State public health statutes are frequently outdated. The Model Act of 2003 focuses on the mission and powers of public health agencies as well as the rights of individuals subjected to governmental powers once a public health emergency has been declared. An important model is presented in which a governor of a state would declare an emergency under strict criteria and the legislature and judiciary would provide checks and balances.

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Forensic Aspects of Biological and Chemical Terrorism is a critically needed resource in a society where threats of terrorist attacks have become a daily occurrence. It provides valuable insight into improvements needed in currently placed systems in terms of emergency preparedness and management. Dr. Wecht has drawn

together a first class panel of experts in an easily readable text that provides important new perspectives in medicine, law, public health and ethics. A drawback to the book is lack of coordination between some chapters and repetition of some topics. Ultimately, this book is a timely and necessary resource.