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## So why and how could terrorists use anthrax?

**By John Eldridge**, *Editor of Jane's NBC Protection Equipment*

Recent publicity surrounding the Anthrax cases in Florida has caused alarm among the general public about the potential terrorist use of biological warfare (BW). However, while the Al-Qaeda network has identified chemical, biological and, indeed, nuclear weapons as attractive additions to its armoury, there is still a large technical gulf to be bridged before disease cultures can be bred or precursor chemicals acquired for the creation of chemical weapons.

That said, anthrax comes in the form of a hardy spore and, correctly prepared, could be introduced, for example, into a building ventilation system to cause injury. Some other pathogens, identified in Western defence circles among the top 10 biological agents, are highly infectious. These, such as smallpox and plague, are highly dangerous to use as weapons since, once released, they risk potentially becoming a global problem and can find their way back into the perpetrators' camp.

Non-infectious diseases like pulmonary anthrax (caused by the bacillus anthracis in sporulated form) may have been considered because the outbreak can be both targeted and contained. Iraq is known to have retained stocks of anthrax culture and the disease may also have been obtained by Syria, Libya and Egypt.

It is of concern that the terror network responsible for the atrocities of 11 September appears bent on creating large casualty tolls, unlike organisations like the IRA or ETA, whose policy has been to hit physical infrastructure targets and avoid large numbers of dead or injured. Biological or chemical weapons must therefore be considered a theoretical possibility in Al-Qaeda's plans.

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BW agents have, in the past, been more a feature of 'grudge events' than of terrorism. Disaffected former employees have injected oranges with mercury and introduced salmonella into chickens.

The Rashneeshees used salmonella as a BW agent in Oregon and were 'disappointed' at the slow speed with which the event revealed itself in the target population (in some ways, this was a grudge event since they were unhappy at the local planning authority, whom they saw as frustrating their attempts to expand their facilities). This incident in Oregon, however, raises another drawback of using BW agents: they don't act fast. With most diseases, the victims will present with 'flu-like symptoms': a sign of the body's immune system beginning to attack the pathogen. This process will spread over a period of many days, with the immuno-compromised presenting early while the young and fit hold out for longer.

The reactions to a BW event by the emergency services need to be very swift, especially in the case of highly infective pathogens. Key activities include contact tracking, good communications to provide warning and the development of vaccines once the precise disease strain is identified. The most important factor of all is to stop people moving and transmitting the disease. This is easier said than done and would, in the event, become a major public order issue.