

Lehigh County to get machine that screens for biological agents

It will expedite results, help find out what substances need more testing.

By ANN WLAZELEK Of The Morning Call

November 21, 2001

Lehigh County will buy equipment that can speed up or eliminate steps in the testing of suspicious substances for anthrax. John Conklin, director of the county's emergency management agency, said he is ordering an \$8,000 machine and test strips that can screen for biological agents, such as anthrax, botulism and plague, within 15 minutes.

The equipment, made by Alexeter Technologies of Wheeling, Ill., will not take the place of more sophisticated and accurate tests performed by the State Health Laboratory in Lionville or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. But as a screening tool the machine can help emergency response teams quickly determine which samples need to be sent for additional testing, Conklin said. "We need a quicker turn-around," he said of test results that can take days or weeks to receive, based on the level of priority assigned.

Conklin heard about the rapid-result screening system from his counterparts in Bucks and Philadelphia counties, who purchased the machines and strips. He hopes to receive the machine and strips by the end of December. Conklin said police, hazardous material handlers and local FBI officials have gotten better at assessing the risk of suspicious substances since the first local specimen was sent to an FBI office in Philadelphia Oct. 12. However, law enforcement officials in Lehigh and Northampton counties have sent hundreds of samples to Philadelphia that probably didn't need to leave the Lehigh Valley, he said.

Of the 300 to 400 packages sent, only a small percentage went on to the state health lab for confirmatory tests and none of them tested positive, Conklin said. In trained hands, the new equipment should be able to screen out things like powdered cream or sugar, Conklin said. Only substances that test positive using the screening equipment or those that otherwise represent a credible threat would continue on to the FBI or to the State Health Laboratory. Asking the right questions can screen out 99 percent of the suspicion, Conklin said. The equipment just adds another tool, he said.

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Source: Allentown Morning Call, Allentown, PA

Date: 11/21/2001

Price: \$2.95

Document Size: Very Short (344 words)

Document ID: UU20011122040000333

Subject(s): BIOLOGICAL AGENT; LOCAL/REGIONAL; SAFETY; LEHIGH COUNTY; SECURITY; PURCHASE; MANAGEMENT; EMERGENCY

Citation Information: FIRST; Vol. 167, Issue: 225; REGIONAL REPORT Section

Author(s): ANN WLAZELEK Of The Morning Call

Document Type: Article

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