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New units can make short work of anthrax scares

It took 13 hours and a laboratory in Harrisburg to rule out **anthrax** after white powder fell from a letter opened at Mercyhurst College in October.

The Erie Bureau of Fire and the Erie County Emergency Management Agency each has bought portable lab **units** that **can** identify **anthrax** and other biological hazards.

"Instead of spending 13 hours on the Mercyhurst College campus, we **can** know within 15 minutes if a suspicious material is a dangerous biological material," Assistant Fire Chief Tom Lawson said Thursday.

A secretary working in Mercyhurst's Old Main on Oct. 30 opened an envelope containing white powder and a letter claiming the powder was **anthrax**. Authorities sealed off the building for two days and sent hundreds of students and administrators through a precautionary decontamination and vaccination regimen.

FBI testing at a state Department of Health lab in Harrisburg finally determined the material was harmless, easing the fears of those who might have been exposed.

The Mercyhurst investigation prompted the Bureau of Fire to spend \$5,000 for the equipment. The Emergency Management Agency followed suit, prompted by the Mercyhurst hoax and other reports of unidentified powder that came in after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"It will be a major asset to us if we have to respond to these kinds of calls in the future," Emergency Management Agency Director Nick Sleptzoff said.

The Guardian Bio Threat Alert System, manufactured by Illinois-based Alexeter Technologies, **can** detect biological threats with 95 percent accuracy, Lawson said.

The **unit** comes with test strips for **anthrax**, Ricin, botulinum toxin, SEB and plague. If a substance is suspected to be **anthrax**, a hazardous materials worker **can** mix the substance with a clear liquid that comes with the **unit** and place it on an **anthrax** test strip. The strip indicates whether the substance is **anthrax** within 15 minutes, Lawson said.

The equipment also includes a test strip reader that **can** read results hard to detect with the eye, Lawson said. That test also takes about 15 minutes to complete.

Sleptzoff said the equipment, on the market since April 2000, will allow authorities to avoid sending an entire hazardous materials team to an incident such as the one at Mercyhurst. Instead, one qualified person **can** respond with the **new** equipment and **make** a quick determination.