



Joshua Lederberg

# Congress Should Examine Biological Warfare Tests

THE ETHICS of biological experimentation has become a subject of legislative interest in the last few months. This concern started from the publicity given to important advances like heart transplantation. It may now have a much more pointed application to experiments laden with global hazards, conducted in great secrecy, and outside the reach of any tradition of medical ethics. The news that provokes this observation comes from Skull Valley, Utah, near the Dugway Proving Grounds of the Army Materiel Command.

A few thousand sheep have died, suddenly and mysteriously. At this writing, the Army is still investigating the incident; earlier news reports quoted some military spokesmen as quick to deny the possibility that some experiments at Dugway had misfired.

An independent investigation is clearly out of the question in such a security-sensitive area. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to see how a credible account can be obtained, whatever the facts.

IF THE incident had no ramifications beyond the accidental release of a potent chemical weapon; if the hazard were limited under any circumstances to a few thou-

sand people, it might be put down to the fortunes of war. The incidental risks would not be fundamentally different from those of high-explosive munitions, casually transported on a large scale.

Sadly, one of the insanities of the chase after military security is a world-wide competition in research and development on biological warfare. Because the Russians or the Chinese might be investigating exotic bacteria and viruses, the argument goes, we must do the same in self-defense. And of course the Russians and the Chinese have exactly the same reaction to our own secret programs:

THESE ACTIVITIES are aimed at practicing the large-scale deployment of the most contagious enemies of man that he can discover or invent. Our personal security must then depend on the depth of the technical competence of the men responsible for the research. This is impossible to judge from outside the secrecy barrier. However, it is almost certain that the technicians willing to work in this area are self-selected for peculiar nonchalance about it. Who else would? Without other objective surveillance, we have to be unforgivingly harsh in our judgment of mistakes and leaks that do come to public notice.

Is anyone competent enough to play with these matches, which are designed to ignite "controlled pestilence"? According to a paper in the December 8, 1967, issue of Science magazine, the American Public Health Association has a file of 2700 cases of virus infections contracted by workers in medical laboratories. These included 107 fatalities. This file is probably not complete; we have no way of knowing the completeness with which such cases are reported from military research laboratories. I do know that one of my late colleagues in microbial genetics died of a plague infection contracted in the British laboratories at Porton. And he died in town.

IN THE MIDST of the global arms race, it would be futile to demand a unilateral abnegation of research on biological weapons. A

Congress interested in biological ethics should, however, make insistent demands for efforts, which do not now exist, to find formulas for international control of species-suicidal research. For his own personal security, every Congressman should also seek his own assurance—less readily available to the common citizen—that the internal surveillance of experiments with contagious weapons is prudent enough to suit him and his family.