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Santa Fe, NM  
**Nuclear Watch of New Mexico**  
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**Physicians for Social Responsibility**  
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**The Sunshine Project**  
Austin, TX  
**Tri-Valley CAREs**  
Livermore, CA

## **Loose Monkey Teaches Biodefense Lab a Lesson on the Hazards of Secrecy**

(26 February) - Biodefense accidents can spread of some of the world's most infectious and lethal diseases. As part of the \$6 billion-plus expansion of the US biodefense program, more than three dozen new and upgraded "hot zones" have been proposed across the country. Arms control experts and health and safety watchdog groups are deeply concerned that secrecy at these labs will undermine US compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention, result in accident cover-ups, and obscure risks to surrounding communities. Because of these concerns, in early February, a group of non-profit watchdogs began sending a series of open letters to proposed biodefense labs asking them to commit, in writing, to policies that prohibit all classified research and which ensure transparency of their operations.

A contender to receive federal biodefense funding is the University of California at Davis (UCD), which wishes to build a biosafety level 4 laboratory (BSL4), the most secure type of facility, capable of handling dangerous agents such as Ebola virus. In recent weeks, UCD's proposal has come under intense fire from community activists. UCD only consulted its neighbors in the final days before submitting its BSL4 proposal, when it sought a letter of support from the Davis City Council. Some BSL4 labs, including that proposed by UCD, deliberately infect animals with disease.

Davis citizens were understandably angered when the story broke on Monday that a monkey had escaped from UCD's primate breeding facility, which rears animals for biodefense experiments. University officials had been hiding the story for ten days. It took a whistleblower's leak to the local newspaper before UCD decided to advise the community of the security breach. UCD says the rhesus monkey - which remains at large - is disease-free; but citizens are asking the obvious questions: Why did UCD keep the escape secret? According to Joshua English, a community activist in Davis, "*When we found out that UCD officials suppressed information regarding the escaped monkey, the first thing that I think came to everyone's mind was 'how open will they be when that escaped monkey is infected with ebola?'*"

**Not Monkey Business:** The rogue two kilogram primate has done far more than thwart her captors. The lost monkey would have been an embarrassment under any circumstances; but UCD's suppression of the news provoked anger that may have delivered a deathblow to UCD's BSL4 ambition, tipping the balance on the Davis City Council against the University. Davis Mayor Susie Boyd says she personally supports UCD; but because of community opposition, has joined opponents on the City Council and disinvited UCD's project from the city. Boyd wrote UCD that she and the City Council "*have concluded the facility will remain an unwelcome project by our residents.*" Adding to UCD's woes was a vote, last Friday, in which UCD workers allied in the Professional and Technical Employees Union decided against the BSL4 proposal. The Union represents laboratory workers and animal handlers.

**Secrets Elsewhere:** UCD's lack of transparency has put its application for federal biodefense dollars in deep jeopardy. While other laboratories have avoided UCD's catastrophic meltdown, some are

committing the same errors that have led to UCD's woes. The New York State Department of Health's Wadsworth Center and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, for example, believe that even the fact that they are seeking a new biodefense lab should remain a secret.

At the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) in Galveston, officials are quietly retreating from a pledge made in 2001 that their BSL4 facility will not conduct classified work and will be "*wide open and above board*". That standard, which UTMB used in public meetings and on its website, has been downgraded to apply only to its "*current plans*". Future work, outside researchers granted access to its labs, and new laboratory spaces are under no such transparency commitment.

There is also biosafety accident history that has not been presented to the public. One of UTMB's lead researchers formerly directed a Yale University lab where faulty equipment and inadequate safety measures resulted in a researcher being infected with Brazilian Hemorrhagic Fever (sabia virus). The infected scientist did not report the accident, in which a liquid containing a high concentration of sabia was aerosolized. The severity of the accident and the infection were not detected by lab management for several days, during which the virus was released outside the containment zone. Sabia is usually spread by rodents and is not believed to be human-to-human transmissible, however, some closely-related arenaviruses (a UTMB specialty) can be spread from person to person. The infected scientist was successfully treated after showing symptoms. The lab director left Yale shortly after the incident.

*"UTMB is propping up a transparency façade through carefully crafted statements that don't mean what they sound like. A careful look at UTMB's words betrays a sad slide toward secrecy,"* says Edward Hammond, Director of the Sunshine Project, a biological weapons watchdog in Austin, TX, *"Most of all, I am concerned about how the behavior of UCD and UTMB will impact biological weapons control. The international system to prevent these weapons relies on transparency, on the ability of an informed public to judge the nature and intent of biodefense experiments. This security seems to be an afterthought for these institutions. They are instead preoccupied with public image and scientific rivalries, threatening control of biological weapons with their petty arrogance."*

The US Department of Energy's proposals to construct and operate biowarfare agent facilities inside its nuclear weapons labs poses an additional, very serious threat to US compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Inside the DOE bio-facilities classified research on bio-agents would be conducted inside classified nuclear weapons development centers - the antithesis of the openness on which the watchdogs insist.

**The "No Secrets" Pledge** Non-profit biodefense watchdogs are calling on biodefense labs to make a "no secrets" pledge that includes specific transparency elements. So far, they have contacted three proposed BSL4 biodefense laboratories - UCD, UTMB, and (today) Rocky Mountain Labs in Hamilton, MT. Elements of the pledge, to be made in writing, include a commitment to not conduct classified research (or permit it in their facilities) and to operate completely transparent biosafety committees, the groups that review proposed projects. So far, none have responded. In the coming weeks, the watchdogs will contact more of the three dozen institutions across the US who are seeking new or substantially upgraded hot zone facilities. These include Boston University and the University of Illinois at Chicago, which both are seeking BSL4 facilities. Copies of the letters sent to labs are available at <http://www.sunshine-project.org/biodefense/openletters.html>