

Anthrax scare at MSU leaves long-term scars

October 9, 2002 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 3123

Anthrax scare at MSU leaves long-term scars

By DANIEL STURM

It was 1:14 p.m. Oct. 12, 2001, when the dispatcher for the MSU police, Heidi Williams, received a phone call from Debbie Conlin, an employee at Linton Hall's Graduate School. Conlin reported opening a letter and feeling a "burning sensation go down my throat. And I don't know if it's anything. My co-workers encouraged me to call." The letter stated the sender's purpose was to stop "animal cruelty."

Emergency procedures were immediately set in motion. The MSU police informed the FBI, the MSU Office of Radiation, Chemical and Biological Safety and the East Lansing Fire Department. But like the children's whispering-message game of "telephone," important information had been confused in these early moments of communication. At 1:54 p.m. dispatcher Williams informed the East Lansing Fire Department of an envelope with "a powdery substance in it," though Conlin has said nothing about "white powder."

As it later turned out, the dispatcher had confused the report from Linton Hall with another call that had reported white powder. Sixteen minutes earlier, Williams had received a call from a woman at the University Club reporting that a month before, on Sept. 5, she'd opened a suspicious envelope containing white powder. Now, the two incidences had gotten mixed up. "The level of response escalated rapidly when the information at hand suggested an incident involving biological and chemical contamination related to the mail," MSU Vice President Fred Poston summarized four weeks after.

2 p.m

By 2 o' clock East Lansing firemen arrived at Linton Hall and met with an MSU officer. The doors of suite 110, where Debbie Conlin brought the letter from 118 to make a copy, had been locked and eight employees told that they would have to be decontaminated and afterward go to Sparrow Hospital. Carol Bahl, the

executive staff assistant to the dean of the Graduate School, remembers the scene: "It almost gained a momentum of its own. I think they were in a panic since it was the first time they'd ever had anything like this happen. The adrenalin was going, and boy, they were going to do it. It was new for everybody."

Hope Johnson, a 21-year old student worker, remembers how her bosses tried to convince the officials that there was no white powder. "No one was listening, no one cared." The dean of the Graduate School, Karen Klomparens, called Poston's office and other places, attempting to convey that "white powder" had never been reported, and that they'd gotten the wrong message. But the emergency authorities were going ahead with the procedure. "I thought it was ridiculous. We didn't need to be decontaminated, but we had no choice," says Hope Johnson.

In a meeting 10 days after the incident with the 15 women, Poston admitted that the administration had received a phone call from the dean confirming that there was no powder, according to the ACLU report. But since the MSU police dispatcher had told him, President Peter McPherson and Provost Lou Anna Simon otherwise, they agreed to proceed as if powder was involved. The administration had also been told by Sparrow Hospital that it would not accept any patients unless they had first been decontaminated.

2:30 p.m

By 2:30 p.m. Linton Hall was locked down and employees were sequestered into three rooms. Lt. Richard Montgomery of the East Lansing Fire Department later reported a "probable biological threat incident." But at the time, an office worker, Evette Chavez, across the hall from Suite 110, hadn't been informed of this. Seeing that yellow tape now surrounded the building, and that police and firefighters were all over, she buzzed her colleagues in Suite 110. "They told me that there was an envelope, but there was nothing in it. It was no big deal, so I kept working."

Chavez didn't know things had become dangerous until two men in hazard suits like in "E.T." kicked off her door. "I was verbally and physically threatened by a police officer in a hazmat suit," she said in an interview with City Pulse. Since Chavez refused to go through the decontamination procedure, she was saved for last. "He said I would be arrested and dragged down the hall, and my cloth would be ripped off." Chavez sat at her desk until it was her turn. "I had no choice."

4 p.m

By 4 p.m. the decontamination station outside Room 110 was set up, and the hazard team continually monitored the air quality. In "Pool One" the women were hosed down with water while fully dressed. In "Pool Two" there was a large plastic bag of about shoulder height, in which they undressed and left their wet cloth. The firemen washed them down with bleach and water solution, with brushes. They were rinsed down quickly to remove the bleach solution, with a third solution of water and soap. Finally, the women were given a quarantine suit to put on, and escorted to the ambulance.

City Pulse spoke with four women who experienced what they described as a very dehumanizing experience. They felt threatened by the forceful orders of an all-male emergency team that they take their clothes off. Some of the women felt that at some point they were on parade, with at least six suited men standing around them. No medical history on any of the 15 individuals who were decontaminated was ever taken before the decontamination process. Some women report that they were treated differently: Some were rinsed three times and some twice, some were brushed, and some weren't. Several women said they were told to hurry, because the hazard team didn't bring enough air tanks for the "suits." "It was definitely a

bungled job," said Chavez, who is reminded every time she smells bleach or she sees firemen of being "assaulted in the place where you work, and where you go five days a week." She said even one year later she felt angry and violated, and that no one has been held accountable.

A person who experiences a trauma that induces fear, horror or helplessness is at risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder if certain symptoms persist - such as re-experiencing the event through recollections, flashbacks and dreams triggered by cues. After the Oct. 12 decontamination procedure, Linton Hall's 15 female employees received three sessions of group counseling with a psychiatrist. "It definitely helped to hear how other people handled it," said Melissa Granger, another student employee at the Graduate School. It was not MSU but Klomparens, their boss, who offered the counseling sessions. The following Monday the Graduate School employees received a dozen roses for the office from the vice president's office. "It would have made a big difference if there'd been an effort to call us over the weekend, to see at least how we were doing," says Carol Bahl, the executive staff assistant to the dean. She felt a need for answers, not roses.

Bahl said the firemen did not look at her or touch her inappropriately. "What bothered me was the fact that there were people just a couple of feet away from the decontamination area that weren't in suits and just appeared to be standing watching. I don't know who they were. I remember wondering 'Why is the air not safe here, and right there - two or three feet further - it's OK?'" The fire department's report mentions two Office of Radiation, Chemical and Biological Safety personnel dressed in hooded overalls with a different type of air filter; other reports mention additional FBI and MSU police personnel who did not wear air filters.

In addition to their complaints about the miscommunicated report and failure of the police officials to believe staff that no "white powder" had been found, the women reported the lack of privacy was a serious problem. The hall doors to the Graduate School offices were closed, but the windows were not covered. People coming downstairs into the main hall, from the second and third floors and people walking back and forth between the rooms were able to clearly see the undressed women. Sheets were only draped in the main lobby doorway to insure privacy from the outside. "Later one of my co-workers told me that she saw me when I was in the hallway," Bahl said. "And on TV we saw an interview with a guy who said he saw a woman being scrubbed without clothes on."

Two employees across the hall in room 101 and 102, which is much closer to suite 110 than 116, where Chavez was quarantined, were allowed to leave the building. Meanwhile everyone on the second and third floor of Linton Hall was forced to stay. One employee who sorts the mail for the building went shopping at Meijer's. "Why wasn't the mail person decontaminated?" wonders Bill Castanier, an ACLU spokesman.

5:10 p.m

At 5:10, Chavez was decontaminated at Linton Hall. Now three ambulances drove the 15 women to Sparrow Hospital for a second round of decontamination. Paramedics in the ambulances told them to take cool showers for the next few days because the chemicals could seep into their pores if they took hot showers. Then Sparrow medical staff gave the MSU employees hot showers upon their arrival at the hospital. Arriving back at Linton Hall by 8:30 p.m, a surreal day ended for Chavez and the last seven in her group. Their clothes were still in the bags they'd left them in when being contaminated. "An officer in the lobby told us to just wash our clothes as usual," recalled Bahl. She said that some women even took the plastic bags back home.

The Aftermath

Castanier called the incident a Laurel and Hardy routine. Considering that this community had a university, a state government and BioPort - the only U.S. producer of a vaccine against anthrax, which provides the military its stockpile - one would think a procedure would be in place that clearly delineated what should take place when emergency crew enters a building, said Castanier. "But they began a decontamination procedure not even knowing what they're decontaminating. They had no clue!"

In fact, the MSU police wasn't able to test the letter on site. According to the campus police Chief Jim Dunlap, the department ordered the necessary test kit after 9/11 but didn't receive it until Oct. 13. He said that it took four hours to get approval to move the letter in question to the lab. By 9 p.m. that evening they were told there were no hazardous substances on the letter.

When he heard about the case, Henry Silverman, president of the Lansing chapter of the ACLU, said, "It just struck me right away that something was wrong with it." Shortly after the ACLU found an attorney for the 15 women. "I think there should be clear rules that protect people's privacy, so that it doesn't become an unreasonable search procedure, which I think this instance clearly was," Silverman. said

The retired MSU history professor (who writes a column for City Pulse every other week) called the incident a confusion of responsibilities. "No one knew who was in charge," he said.

Silverman said that in an emergency situation, when dealing with an immediate crime, one might stretch people's civil rights. "But I doubt there are as many emergencies as people think there are. The police like to claim that everything is an emergency and therefore don't need to go to a judge for appropriate search rights." Silverman said the ACLU hasn't given up the idea of taking legal action. However, with six or seven different jurisdictions involved, the case would probably take a lot of time, energy, and money. "It's complicated, because first of all, which group would you sue?"

One month after the Linton Hall case MSU promised to improve its protocol. According to the provost's office, the MSU police and the university's Office of Radiation, Chemical and Biological Safety have formed a rapid response team, to secure and investigate situations firsthand. New measures include having a trained communicator to mediate between police and the people involved, and a physician trained in decontamination procedures. MSU has also bought a decontamination tent for the purpose of increasing personal privacy. Additionally, a female technician will be assigned to be present, and both the communicator and the physician will keep in touch with the people involved in an incident, and will manage counseling after it's over.

Bonnie Bucqueroux, coordinator of MSU's School of Journalism Victims and the Media Program, says "Police officers are very action oriented people, and they do not always communicate well with people, even though it works against them." Bucqueroux says that in her training of police officers she focuses on improving their communication skills. When treated like humans people cooperate much better than if someone arrogantly walks in and barks orders, she said.

In the Linton Hall incident there were just 15 people, and there was no Anthrax, Bucqueroux reflected. She wondered what would happen "if an airliner comes into Lansing and someone had intentionally been infected. Do we have protocols in place? Has the community had a voice in building that plan? Would you kill one of the infected persons who's trying to escape?" Bucqueroux sorts through these tough questions in a book project she's writing on the bio-terrorism response. Referring to the Linton Hall incident and others,

she's come to some rather disillusioning conclusions. "We're a culture that always waits for the crisis and deals with it later. I believe these women are asking us to confront these problems now."

Care to respond? Send letters to letters@lansingcitypulse.com. View our Letters policy.

Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: October 9, 2002

Copyright (c) 2002 Lansing City Pulse. All rights reserved.