

February 16, 1999

E. Ratcliffe Anderson, Jr., MD
Executive Vice President
American Medical Association
515 North State Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610

Dear Dr. Anderson:

The American College of Physicians-The American Society of Internal Medicine (ACP-ASIM), the nation's largest specialty society, represents over 110,000 physicians of internal medicine in the United States and throughout the world. The College is concerned about the threat to the public health of acts of bio-terrorism and the apparent lack of preparedness of physicians and medical and public health organizations to deal with this menace. Our organization asks that the American Medical Association devote attention to this matter, as it is one of grave importance.

In President Clinton's State of the Union Address, he mentioned the impending threat of bio-terrorism and stressed that we prepare ourselves for the possibility of an attack. The president reaffirmed his commitment to preparing the United States for an attack of this kind and promised to request 40% more funding for bio-terrorism preparation this year in the budget he will submit to Congress in February. Disaster planning for responding to biologic and chemical weapons is a serious issue and the College believes that neither the physician community nor the public health structure of United States is adequately equipped to deal with a potential outbreak.

The planning and training to deal with bio-terrorism should involve primary care physicians, as they would be the first line of defense in the event of this type of emergency. However, few physicians are currently familiar with the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of biological, chemical or radiological agents. Physicians and other clinical staff are inexperienced in handling bio-hazardous materials and lack guidelines and other information regarding treatment and control measures. We are concerned that in the event of terrorist acts that could cause an epidemic of diseases such as smallpox or anthrax, physicians might fail to correctly diagnose these conditions that are now rarely encountered. Furthermore, laboratories often do not have trained personnel or equipment to identify suspected agents such as those that might be employed in a terrorist attack. ACP-ASIM advocates the development of a method to quickly evaluate medical conditions of victims of chemical agents.

ACP-ASIM proposes to work with the American Medical Association and other health care and provider organizations to establish an educated and prepared physician base that is able to deal with the health effects resulting from a bio-terrorist attack. We hope to cooperate with other organizations to educate and train our members to recognize the symptoms and properly diagnose cases of those afflicted by biological agents in instances of biological warfare. We urge the AMA to take the lead in galvanizing all of organized medicine to (1) involve physicians in the development of a federal structure that can respond to the medical needs of the public in the

event of bio-terrorist attacks and (2) develop and help disseminate antidotes for treating the conditions that could ensue from exposure to these reprehensible biological agents.

Which biological agents represent the most impending threats and how to best respond to these are questions that require immediate answers. The federal government must identify specific agents that are most likely to be used and must prepare counter-measures to deal with outbreaks. The federal government and state governments need to work together to implement a system that determines how and where to stockpile antidotes to nerve agents and other biologics and to establish an efficient system to distribute them.

Together, we need to ensure that physicians have a sufficient capacity to diagnose symptoms early, and that antidotes for commonly feared agents such as anthrax and smallpox are available in ample supply for public use in the event of an emergency.

ACP-ASIM believes that the threat of bio-terrorism is very real and supports action by the AMA to devote attention to this matter. We support the President's commitment to protecting the nation against bio-terrorist attacks and we want to ensure that the physician community is equipped to deal with these potential risks. We urge the AMA to take action now to help prepare the health care community to respond to acts of bio-terrorism and to help prepare the civilian population for such occurrences.

Sincerely,

Harold C. Sox, MD, FACP