
Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands. Defence against bioterrorism. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2001; publication no. 2001/16.

This report examines health-related issues concerning the risk of a terrorist attack employing biological agents. At the request of the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport, the Health Council appointed a Committee to consider the nature of the threat posed by bioterrorism, and to examine means of defence against this threat.

The Committee draws attention to the open character of Dutch society, which renders the 'importation' of pathogens a relatively simple undertaking. Furthermore, given the high degree of mobility and of urbanization in the Netherlands, such agents would readily be able to make their effects felt. The Committee therefore considers there to be a realistic risk, although there has been little experience with terrorist attacks employing biological agents to date.

The Committee believes that pathogenic agents can hardly be assessed and ranked in terms of their 'usability'. While the current literature identifies a number of agents (such as anthrax and smallpox) as 'high priority' risks, there are thousands of other pathogens in existence. Moreover, genetic modification enables new, hitherto unidentified, agents to be created. It is therefore essential to remain alert to information provided by the intelligence agencies and similar organisations. With the aid of their international sister organisations, the intelligence agencies would seem to be best placed to form an opinion regarding the plausibility of certain attack scenarios. The Ministry of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations has formed a 'scenarios' workgroup, which shares responsibility in this area.

The focus of the current report is on quality of the defence system. The Committee's recommendation is that the fullest possible use be made of arrangements

which are already in place. Of these, two contingency plans are of particular importance. Since November 1999, a set of instructions covering 'Explosions of infectious diseases' has been available. This is a manual for the joint area health authorities (GGD) containing instructions for the containment of sudden epidemics and their effects. A second (interim) scheme relates to the strategy for dealing with a worldwide influenza epidemic. Its object is to limit health damage and to prevent an imminent social disruption. In order to have a defence against bioterrorism which is ready for battle, several elements of both contingency plans require further definition and strengthening. Moreover, certain additions are necessary. The Committee makes the following recommendations:

- Responsibility lies with professional organisations for making physicians more fully aware of the possibility and hazard of the deliberate dissemination of biological agents.
- To identify unknown or rare pathogens in time a well-organised network of national and international experts in microbiology is indispensable. Existing structures have to be further formalized and require additional financing.
- Existing LCI protocols (LCI: National Coordination Structure for the Control of Infectious Diseases) relating to several high priority agents should be expanded and elaborated by means of an Appendix covering possible terrorist use.
- In addition to the elaborations just mentioned it is important to produce a separate set of instructions concerning bioterrorism. This will have to be part of the proposed contingency plan covering NBC attacks (NBC: Nuclear, Biological, Chemical), to be drawn up under the auspices of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Kingdom Relations.
- Once such a plan covering bioterrorism is available, it is imperative that the defence measures involved be subject to prior rehearsal and practice.
- It is essential to establish closer international cooperation in the development and production of specific vaccines, antibiotics, and antiviral agents.