



ACS Presidents on Biosecurity

Letter from the Presidents of the Tri-Societies to the memberships of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA December 3, 2001

Recent acts of terrorism have caused each of us to reevaluate the way we do nearly everything. This is of itself a good thing. New researchable needs, changes in personal and professional priorities, and a heightened awareness of certain values, can all lead to renewed creativity and energy. It is vital to channel these challenges into productivity and progress while protecting against the threat of bioterrorism.

In late November, several officers of our societies attended the Council of Scientific Society Presidents meeting in Washington DC. As you might guess, terrorism and specifically bio-terrorism was high on the agenda. Along with other current officers of scientific societies from across the country, we were asked to brainstorm what our societies could do to help combat and defend against terrorism. Much discussion and many ideas surfaced. Ideas that seem particularly appropriate to our Societies are:

1. **RISK ASSESSMENT.** There is an urgent need to identify assets that are particularly vulnerable to attack and that would represent an irreplaceable loss to our science. An example would be seed storage sites where irreplaceable genetic material is maintained. Other examples would include identification of microbes that can be used as, or in weapons, against our plant and animal resources, how these weapons might be delivered, and identification of specific likely targets.
2. **COMMUNICATION.** During this time of national emergency, it is essential to communicate information and to stay well informed. Thus, it is recommended that our website be expanded to include links to other sources of information on biosecurity including other scientific societies and government agencies. Another example of the need to communicate is that within our data bases and collective publications, information may already exist that has immediate value. The recent finding that detailed maps of the caves of Afghanistan existed at the University of Nebraska is a good example.
3. **GRANT OPPORTUNITIES.** As new research is required and funding agencies respond, information about these opportunities can be tracked and provided to our membership. Currently, many proposals are being received unsolicited "over the transom" but a more organized approach will emerge shortly.
4. **LEGAL DECISIONS AND REGULATORY ISSUES.** Heightened security concerns, overlaid with concerns for academic freedom and rational decisions, are going to be needed. Pursuit of certain research leads inevitably to the acquisition of new information that can be used to develop weapons of destruction as well as valuable advances in science. Does this mean that such research should not be conducted or if conducted should not be made publicly

available? Should graduate students be required to take an equivalent of the 'Hippocratic Oath' required by the medical profession for physicians? These questions are being asked already and we need to contribute to designing a rational response. Each of our Societies already has a Statement of Ethics; these Statements can be found on the Societies' respective web sites. If you haven't read this statement, we encourage you to do so.

5. **INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS.** In our undergraduate and graduate student members, we have some of our brightest and best minds with the creativity and imagination to design solutions for these challenges. This is not only a valuable asset but involvement as students will further insure their involvement as scientists.
6. **IDENTIFICATION OF EXPERTS.** Our societies can help to direct requests for specific expertise to appropriate specialists for a rapid response to emerging challenges. To respond appropriately to emerging situations, it is critical to identify those who have this needed expertise. With your help in identifying our areas of expertise, our Societies can assist in this process.

The safety of our people, critical assets, a healthy economy, and a safe and secure food and water supply concern us both as individuals and as scientific societies. There are things that we can do. To this end, the presidents of our three societies are jointly appointing an ad hoc Committee on Biosecurity. The Committee is charged with pursuing the options discussed here as well as developing other ways in which our societies can play an active role in protecting our nation from the threat of bioterrorism. You will shortly find a new link on our website that takes you to other sources of information on terrorism. If you would like to contribute directly to this effort, we want to hear from you. Please contact us. Together, we can help to create a safer world!

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