

# Deadly Germ Research Is Shut Down at Army Lab Over Safety Concerns

Problems with disposal of dangerous materials led the government to suspend research at the military’s leading biodefense center.

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Denise Braun prepared to demonstrate lab work during a media tour at the Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick, Md., in 2011. Patrick Semansky/Associated Press

By Denise Grady

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Safety concerns at a prominent military germ lab have led the government to shut down research involving dangerous microbes like the Ebola virus.

“Research is currently on hold,” the United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, in Fort Detrick, Md., said in a statement on Friday. The shutdown is likely to last months, Carey Vander Linden, a spokeswoman, said in an interview.

The statement said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention decided to issue a “cease and desist order” last month to halt the research at Fort Detrick because the center did not have “sufficient systems in place to decontaminate wastewater” from its highest-security labs.

But there has been no threat to public health, no injuries to employees and no leaks of dangerous material outside the laboratory, Ms. Vander Linden said.



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March 13, 2020

In the statement, the C.D.C. cited “national security reasons” as the rationale for not releasing information about its decision.

The institute is a biodefense center that studies germs and toxins that could be used to threaten the military or public health, and also investigates disease outbreaks. It carries out research projects for government agencies, universities and drug companies, which pay for the work. It has about 900 employees.

The shutdown affects a significant portion of the research normally conducted there, Ms. Vander Linden said.

The suspended research involves certain toxins, along with germs called [select agents](#), which the government has determined have “the potential to pose a severe threat to public, animal or plant health or to animal or plant products.” There are [67 select agents and toxins](#); examples include the organisms that cause Ebola, smallpox, anthrax and plague, and the poison ricin.

In theory, terrorists could use select agents as weapons, so the government requires any organization that wants to handle them to pass a background check, register, follow safety and security procedures, and undergo inspections through a program run by the C.D.C. and the United States Department of Agriculture. As of 2017, 263 laboratories — government, academic, commercial or private — had registered with the program.

The institute at Fort Detrick was part of the select agent program until its registration was suspended last month, after the C.D.C. ordered it to stop conducting the research.

The [shutdown was first reported on Friday](#) by the Frederick News-Post.

The problems date back to May 2018, when storms flooded and ruined a decades-old steam sterilization plant that the institute had been using to treat wastewater from its labs, Ms. Vander Linden said. The damage halted research for months, until the institute developed a new decontamination system using chemicals.

The new system required changes in certain procedures in the laboratories. During an inspection in June, the C.D.C. found that the new procedures were not being followed consistently. Inspectors also found mechanical problems with the chemical-based decontamination system, as well as leaks, Ms. Vander Linden said, though she added that the leaks were within the lab and not to the outside world.

“A combination of things” led to the cease and desist order, and the loss of registration, she said.

Dr. Richard H. Ebright, a molecular biologist and bioweapons expert at Rutgers University, said in an email that problems with the institute’s new chemical-based decontamination process might mean it would have to go back to a heat-based system “which, if it requires constructing a new steam sterilization plant, could entail very long delays and very high costs.”

Although many projects are on hold, Ms. Vander Linden said scientists and other employees are continuing to work, just not on select agents. She said many were worried about not being able meet deadlines for their projects.

[Missteps have occurred at other government laboratories](#), including those at the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health. And in 2009, [research at the institute in Fort Detrick was suspended](#) because it was storing pathogens not listed in its database. The army institute also employed Bruce E. Ivins, a microbiologist who was a leading suspect — but who was never charged — in the anthrax mailings in 2001 that killed five people. [Dr. Ivins died in 2008](#), apparently by suicide.