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FOI request reveals recent TB outbreak at Covance lab: Foes say company has history of deception

By Marshall Terrill
Staff Writer

A recent tuberculosis outbreak in primates at a Covance facility in Madison, Wisc., is a foreshadowing of what could happen locally if the company builds a facility in the Chandler Airpark, says a grassroots organization that brought to light the matter through a public records request. Citizens Against Covance (CAC), a Chandler-based animal rights group, made public a series of documents last week that reveals a June outbreak of tuberculosis (TB) in which Covance had to kill 32 test monkeys to stop the spread of the disease.

CAC, who claims that Covance has a long history of secrecy, deception and violations of federal law, said the latest incident is just par for the course. "Covance has never been straightforward with the citizens of Chandler," said Michael Boerman, who made the records request after he received a tip from a former Covance employee in Madison. "In these modern times of media relations and good publicity, Covance has a markedly poor reputation for not being forthcoming about their faults, and this recent bombshell confirms it."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), tuberculosis is a highly infectious biosafety Level 3 airborne disease that can be easily transmitted from non-human primates to humans. Treatment for TB typically requires at least a six-month regimen that involves taking more than four medications at a time.

Covance spokesperson Camilla Strongin said there was no reason to release the results of the outbreak to the general public. "The public was never at risk at any time and Covance reported the incident to Wisconsin state and federal regulatory officials," Strongin said Dec. 1. "They did everything they were supposed to do." Strongin confirmed that Covance euthanized 32 monkeys after a handful of the primates were diagnosed with TB. She asked that the public look past CAC's "rhetoric" and understand their real intentions.

"CAC is trying to use this incident to create fear," Strongin said. "Their ignorance of the situation is apparent by the statements they have made. The incident was brought to the proper authorities' attention because of a proactive response we took to begin with, not because we were interested in circumventing the process." Donna Clemons, Covance's director of veterinary services for North America, said it was the first incident of TB in its 12-year history at the Madison facility. She said Covance's quarantine facility in Texas is a preventative measure but isn't foolproof when it comes to TB.

"It's one of the many tools and preventative measures we use but TB is difficult to detect because it can lie dormant for a long time," Clemons said. "That's why there's continued vigilance on our part."

She said after test animals go through a second quarantine, they are monitored quarterly for the rest of their lives. Clemons noted that Covance employees wear protective clothes and gear and are routinely tested for TB. She added that the transmission of tuberculosis from a monkey to a human is rare.

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"I have never heard of a case where a lab animal has given tuberculosis to a human being," Clemons said. But Aysha Akhtar, a neurologist for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a Washington D.C.-based animal rights group, said Clemons' statement is "absolutely not true." "TB is highly infective from monkeys to humans and one of the most highly reported diseases among lab workers," Akhtar said. "Otherwise, why are their employees routinely monitored for TB?"

She added that multiple studies have shown that lab workers are four times more likely to contract TB than a member of the general public. "Covance is being irresponsible by not letting the public know about this outbreak and they have a right to know about these instances."

In 1989, a strain of the Ebola virus broke out in test monkeys in a Reston, Va., quarantine facility owned by Hazelton Laboratories Corporation, which was eventually acquired by Covance in the 1990s.

Councilman Matt Orlando said this incident doesn't bode well for Covance. "We should not be finding out about this incident because of a public records request, and I find this troubling," Orlando said Tuesday. "When there was a hazmat spill at an Intel facility about a year ago, they informed us of the problem and we took care of the matter in a timely manner. That's the sort of cooperation and openness I'm looking for with Covance. That's just not the way we're going to do business in Chandler."

Paseo Trails resident Jose Jimenez, who lives near the new proposed facility, said the most recent news doesn't bolster his confidence in the company. "I'm tremendously concerned that something like this could happen in our community," Jimenez said Wednesday. "I'm not only concerned for my two kids but for all children in the area." Jimenez also questioned how Covance would inform the public in case of a future outbreak.

"How is public awareness going to be handled? Has anyone ever read the book The Hot Zone or seen the movie Outbreak? You can try to self-contain a disease but it doesn't take much for it to get out of hand. This is not good."

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