U.S. experts question smallpox strategy
More vaccinations needed, doctor says

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Canada's plan to vaccinate just 500 health care workers against a possible terrorist-spawned outbreak of smallpox is far too limited and courts disaster, two U.S. experts said yesterday.

The government should be looking at immunizing tens of thousands of hospital workers, ambulance attendants and police officers across Canada, so they in turn could operate mass vaccination clinics if there ever was an attack, the scientists said.

They also believe the general public should be given the choice to be vaccinated once the necessary emergency workers get their shots.

"I don't understand how 500 vaccinations could be enough," said Dr. Ed Kaplan, a Yale University professor of public health who has studied the issue extensively.

"The plan-for-the-worst, hope-for-the-best strategy is much more sensible.... We should not wait to see what smallpox can do to Canada. Rather, the policy should be to see what Canada can do to smallpox."

Their comments fuel a heated debate within the scientific community about who should get the smallpox vaccine, and when. The dispute has been played out prominently in the United States, but received little attention here.

While the U.S. administration appears headed to accepting the advice of such experts as Dr. Kaplan and ordering the immediate immunization of at least 500,000 people, the American Centers for Disease Control are still recommending a more limited response, similar to Canada's.

A Health Canada official rejected Dr. Kaplan's criticism yesterday, saying its strategy is based on analysis of evidence and arguments from the world over.

"We obviously consider this threat seriously, but it does have to be weighed against all the other public health threats that we are dealing with all the time," said Dr. Paul Gully. "We have no reason to believe that the threat of smallpox has increased ... but we thought it best to make prudent plans."
Should the government make it illegal for the terrorist group Hezbollah to raise money in Canada, even if some of its money goes to social and political causes?

The strategy is based on a balance between the slim threat of an attack happening and the high rate of side-effects that come with the vaccine, he said.

Health Canada revealed earlier this week it has struck a tentative deal to acquire 10 million doses of vaccine, enough, when diluted, to immunize everyone in the country.

But if there is an outbreak, the department has decided to use so-called ring immunization, which involves vaccinating only those people who may have had contact with known cases.

It is a strategy, endorsed by the World Health Organization, based on how the last vestiges of the disease were eradicated in the early 1970s.

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