

August 5, 2008

LETTERS

Closure in the Anthrax Case?

To the Editor:

Re “Anthrax Case Renews Questions on Bioterror Effort and Safety” (front page, Aug. 3):

The death of Dr. Bruce E. Ivins, a government anthrax specialist and the F.B.I.’s lead suspect in the 2001 anthrax attack, should close a sad chapter in domestic terrorism. We may never know whether the perpetrator’s intention was to draw attention to our lack of national preparedness for bioterrorism. But it is unmistakable that the legacy of the anthrax event, and the ensuing national call to arms, was a radical upgrade of our ability to respond to deliberate or naturally occurring infectious disease outbreaks.

Some critics argue that the multibillion-dollar investment in infrastructure and research diverts funds from more pressing infectious disease problems, and they suggest that we are less secure because more scientists have access to restricted agents. But I stoutly dispute these notions, having witnessed firsthand in 2001 the confusion and helplessness of unprepared scientific and public health professionals.

I am director of a leading Northeast academic biodefense and emerging infectious diseases research center. Our investment has decidedly increased our knowledge of select agent and naturally occurring epidemic pathogens. It has also facilitated a new generation of countermeasures in the form of new diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines against dangerous pathogens.

The anthrax outbreak caught a nation off guard, but we are markedly stronger today.

David Perlin

Newark, Aug. 3, 2008

The writer is director of the Public Health Research Institute.