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### BIOLOGICAL AGENTS And Anthrax... <sup>1</sup>

by  
Andrew Robertson <sup>2</sup>

ANOTHER INTERESTING FORTNIGHT has come to an end, as our ADF ships and personnel pre-deploy to the Gulf. One of the key issues over this period has been the Australian Defence Forces Anthrax Vaccination Program. While generally not controversial, the Anthrax Vaccination Program has reached that status with help from the media and the ADF decision to repatriate those ADF members who refuse to have the vaccine.

One recurring issue has been the safety of the vaccine, which although licenced in the United States and the United Kingdom, is not licenced in Australia. Despite comments to the contrary, this vaccine has been the subject of detailed scrutiny by both Defence and independent reviewers. In particular, the United States Institute of Medicine (IOM), in their publication "The Anthrax Vaccine: Is it Safe? Does it work?" I, has carried out an extensive review of both the efficacy and safety research. They conclude that it is an effective vaccine against anthrax, including inhalational anthrax, and that there are no life-threatening or permanently disabling immediate onset adverse events. They also conclude that there is no evidence of elevated risks of later-onset health effects, including to the reproductive system.<sup>1</sup>

Dr Nass, in a letter to Emergency Medicine News<sup>3</sup> in July 2002, raises the spectre of Gulf War Syndrome, claiming that anthrax vaccination has been linked to Gulf War Syndrome in 5 studies. Her claims were based on a number of prevalence and cross-sectional surveys, which showed some association of multiple vaccines, including plague and anthrax, with reporting of long-term symptoms only. In fact, the evidence, while still weak, was far stronger for the number of vaccines given rather than the specific vaccine.<sup>3,5</sup>

There was no direct claim of an anthrax vaccine link to Gulf War Syndrome by any of the studies and at least one did not even look at anthrax as a risk factor. In contrast, the IOM reviewed a large number of epidemiological studies and found no support for these assertions. A good reminder to go back to the original articles, particularly when sensational claims are made.

#### REFERENCES

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