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Gathering Place

Will Alameida

Hawaii poised to lead U.S. in life-saving bio-research

THE Star-Bulletin recently carried a big story from the New York Times ("Delays plague bioterror vaccines," Sept. 18) about difficulties facing the federal government's \$5.6 billion BioShield program, conceived after 9/11 as a way to develop vaccines and treatments to protect Americans against biological attack. The story focused primarily on the difficulties in developing and producing a vaccine for anthrax, a deadly disease that is a tempting weapon for anyone contemplating a bio-attack on the United States. It also pointed out that only a fraction of the vaccine supply needed to respond to an anthrax attack is available.

That story was the bad news. The good news is that vaccines aren't the only way we have to protect ourselves.

The even more exciting news in Hawaii is that a local company is hot on the trail of developing medications that can treat anthrax and other dangerous diseases, whether sown by terrorists or by Mother Nature. What is most exciting is that these promising medications are not vaccines, but tablets that can be distributed and administered much more easily and cheaply than vaccines.

THE BIOSHIELD program is designed to put some of the country's top medical and scientific minds to work on accelerating the creation of drugs and vaccines to combat the host of man-made and natural biological threats we face. Hawaii is playing a key role in this project and has the potential to become a center for more research and development. PanThera Biopharma, a new Hawaii-based biopharmaceutical company (of which I am president and CEO) is developing orally administered drugs that could potentially treat or prevent infection from such threats as anthrax, botulism, dengue fever and West Nile virus, among other.

PanThera -- formed by Science & Technology International following its acquisition of Hawaii Biotech's small molecule infectious disease drug discovery assets -- is using sophisticated computer modeling, medicinal chemistry and a biochemical screening program to accelerate the development of these safe, effective, orally administered drugs, taking as little as one-third the time required by more conventional methods.

Based on new small-molecule technology, these drugs have a number of advantages over

vaccines, which present some significant challenges -- cold storage requirements that can delay or prevent wide distribution, a relatively short shelf life, and the presumption of a healthy immune system (people with vulnerable immune systems could get sick, or worse, from the vaccine itself).

UNLIKE VACCINES, tablets do not require cold storage, they are easily distributed and administered, they have a long shelf life, and they do not rely on the immune system for efficacy. They therefore have significant practical advantages for emergency stockpiling to deal with both bio-attacks and naturally occurring epidemics and pandemics. Tablets provide the precious gift of time - in a bottle.

This alternative approach to protecting the population -- treatment with tablets after exposure -- holds great promise and could become Hawaii's strength in this developing market. Thanks to the BioShield program, drugs developed under accelerated protocols may be administered orally both to treat those who have already been taken ill and provide protection to those who have been exposed.

When people think about living healthy lives, they often think about living in Hawaii. Our vision is to help Hawaii secure its place as a leader in pharmaceutical research and development that saves lives. Just as we rethink traditional approaches to bioterrorist threats, we must all rethink Hawaii's unique potential as a destination for the best and brightest minds -- those already here and those who wish to return home -- a magnet for major federal funding, and a place where people work to keep our entire nation safe and protected.

NO ONE among us wishes ever to see the day when the products we are developing must be used. However, we take pride in the fact that innovative minds here in Hawaii are playing a leading role in developing protection for millions of people here at home and around the world against the scourges that man and nature might yet have in store for us.

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