

Dear Members of the University Community,

In our continuing promotion of laboratory safety and research compliance, the University Provost's Office and the Dean's Office of the Biological Sciences Division (BSD) convened in September, 2012, a Provost's Biosafety Advisory Group. Under the direction of Deputy Provost Roy Weiss, the provost also convened a university-wide Laboratory Safety Committee to look more generally at our safeguards, protocols, and training resources.

We initiated these processes in the wake of two adverse incidents over a period of three years in which BSD researchers were exposed to infectious agents in a University laboratory, resulting in infections with exceptionally unfortunate consequences. Local and federal governmental reviews of the incidents produced no adverse findings against laboratory, departmental, or institutional procedures, and determined that our research groups were in compliance with current biosafety practices and protocols. Thus the Advisory Group was asked not to investigate again these two incidents nor to evaluate our biosafety protocols *per se*, but rather to produce a report that would aid us in our continuing efforts to safeguard our community while insuring the robustness of our research program.

Toward this end, the Advisory Group was asked to examine the overall structure of biosafety protocols at the University of Chicago, as well as the management of and communication concerning biosafety protocols and hazards. The Group was also asked to make recommendations on how the University's biosafety oversight could be strengthened.

After a preliminary assessment of our procedures and programs, informed by an exhaustive pre-visit document review, the Advisory Group visited the University of Chicago campus and conducted interviews with members of University and Divisional leadership (provost, deans, officers, and directors), as well as with faculty, research staff, postdoctoral researchers, and graduate students. Members of the Advisory Group also toured the Howard T. Ricketts Laboratory, a Regional Biocontainment Laboratory on the campus of Argonne National Labs.

In offering a brief overview of the Advisory Group's findings, we would like to note that Dr. Joseph Kanabrocki, Assistant Dean for Biosafety, received praise for his expertise and dedication. The outreach to the University's biomedical community (in the form of town hall meetings) undertaken after the second incident also received praise. Despite this, the Advisory Group did note weaknesses in the broader biosafety program at the University. Chief among the weaknesses noted were: 1) poor communication to the University community about the incidents, especially in the immediate aftermath; 2) relatively low visibility and understaffing of personnel from the Office of Biosafety (OBS); 3) the reporting structure of the OBS *vis-à-vis* Environmental Health and Safety (EHS), which the Advisory Group pointed out is different from that of many peer institutions (though the Advisory Group did not explicitly call for this structure to be changed, it noted that the University community would certainly benefit from more communication between these two groups).

Key recommendations of the Advisory Group included: 1) preparing a more transparent and rapid response plan to address lab-related crises, including safety- and/or compliance-related emergencies that would be developed and updated regularly by key stakeholders; 2) redressing the recent shift of BSL2 researchers away from the academic life of the main campus to the BSL3 Ricketts facility; 3) improving communication and transparency between those labs that investigate host-pathogen interactions (especially those investigating human pathogens) and those that do not; 4) addressing the question of resource allocation to the OBS; 5) upgrading the IT systems that are used by the Institutional Biosafety Committees and the OBS; and 5) working toward greater integration/coordination of EHS efforts and the work of the OBS staff.

In the coming weeks, the BSD Dean's Office will convene a meeting of key stakeholders to develop a more rapid response protocol to be used in situations that warrant such a response. We will seek to put into place

strategies to enhance communication, transparency, efficiency and coordination, while continuing to focus our attention on the safety of our researchers and trainees, as well as of members of the University community. Moreover, the Laboratory Safety Committee will focus on integrating and streamlining University-wide safety procedures and approaches.

We invite you to read the full report and welcome your feedback.

Sincerely,



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