

Your bioweapon is in the mail

November 10 2005

A New Scientist magazine study suggests it would not be difficult for a terrorist to obtain genes from the smallpox virus or a similarly vicious pathogen.

Researchers say a bioterrorist, armed with only a fake e-mail address, could probably order such deadly biological weapons online and receive them by mail within weeks.

Dozens of biotech firms now offer to synthesize complete genes from the chemical components of DNA, yet some conduct next to no checks on what they are being asked to make, or on who is making the request.

New Scientist said its investigation raises the frightening prospect of terrorists acquiring genes by mail-order for key bioweapon agents and then using them to engineer new and deadly pathogens.

New Scientist queried 16 biotech firms, asking each whether it screened orders for DNA sequences that might pose a bioterror threat. Of the 12 companies replying, only five said they screen every sequence received. Four said they screen some sequences, and three admitted not screening at all.

Whatever reasons deter some companies from screening orders, New Scientist said some firms freely admit they run no sequence screens.

"That's not our business," Bob Xue, a director of Genemed Synthesis in San Francisco, told the magazine.

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Citation: Your bioweapon is in the mail (2005, November 10) retrieved 2 May 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2005-11-bioweapon-mail.html>

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