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Russian Scientist Dies in Ebola Accident at Former Weapons Lab

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By JUDITH MILLER
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A Russian scientist at a former Soviet biological weapons laboratory in Siberia has died after accidentally sticking herself with a needle laced with ebola, the deadly virus for which there is no vaccine or treatment, the lab's parent Russian center announced over the weekend.

Scientists and officials said the accident had raised concerns about safety and secrecy at the State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology, known as Vector, which in Soviet times specialized in turning deadly viruses into biological weapons. Vector has been a leading recipient of aid in an American program to help former Soviet scientists and labs convert to peaceful research.

Although the accident occurred May 5, Vector did not report it to the World Health Organization until last week. Scientists said that although Vector had isolated the scientist to contain any potential spread of the disease and there was no requirement that accidents involving ebola be reported, the delay meant that scientists at the health agency could not provide prompt advice on treatment that might have saved her life.

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The first public mention of the accident was over the weekend on Pro-Med, the informal Internet reporting and discussion network of doctors and other health care professionals, which posted the Vector account of the laboratory accident on its Web site (www.promedmail.org).

American experts said the accident had not occurred in a lab now receiving United States government or private money for research.

While officials at Vector said the scientist, Antonina Presnyakova, was working on an ebola vaccine, they have declined to identify who was financing the research or discuss its specific nature.

Terry Fredeking, the president and founder of Antibody Systems, a Texas-based company, said that while his company had spent more than $150,000 in the last five years on joint research on ebola at Vector, the accident did not involve research he was financing. "It's sad and somewhat frightening," said Mr. Fredeking, "that Vector didn't inform the W.H.O. or even its own lab directors that the accident had occurred in time for us to offer help."

Ronald Atlas, a biodefense expert at a center at the University of Louisville, in Kentucky, said that while it was important to work on vaccines to protect against deadly viruses, the accident showed the danger. "It shows we must be careful about what we are doing, as well as where and with whom we are doing it," said Dr. Atlas, in an interview here at the American Society for Microbiology's annual meeting.

An American scientist was involved in a similar accident with ebola at the Army's leading biodefense lab at Fort Detrick, Md., several months ago. But she did not contract the disease. The lab disclosed the accident within 48 hours, officials said.

Vector is also one of two repositories of the deadly smallpox virus -- the other is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States has spent millions of dollars to help convert such places to peaceful research, including an estimated $10 million at Vector.

Critics of the program have opposed expanding such aid because it is hard to verify whether former Soviet scientists are using the American-supported research for peaceful purposes. But the program's defenders say it keeps scientists employed on peaceful projects and prevents them from working for anti-American states or terrorists seeking biological weapons.

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