

FAILED INSPECTION SLOWS MILITARY'S ANTHRAX VACCINE PROGRAM

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THOMAS D. WILLIAMS

Critics of the military's anthrax vaccination program are saying the failure of the manufacturer's new plant to pass a federal inspection is yet another reason the program should be halted.

Monday, the Pentagon announced that the second phase of its vaccination program has been postponed for six months to a year because of the plant's failure to pass inspection.

The second phase of the program will cover first responders to military overseas operations or those to be sent to areas faced with biological threats, defense officials said. The third and final phase will inoculate the remainder of the force.

Thomas Rempfer, a Connecticut Air National Guard pilot and major who resigned with seven other pilots almost a year ago in protest over the vaccine, said Tuesday he is again asking the state to order the program stopped. Some 6,500 National Guardsmen and reservists are subject to the program in Connecticut.

State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal insisted previously that the state does not have the power to intervene in a federal medical program. On Tuesday, he said he is taking another look at complaints from Rempfer and a fellow pilot and flight commander who resigned, Russell Dingle.

Maj. John Whitford, a spokesman for the National Guard in Connecticut, said he knows of no action taken on the second review of those complaints. He added that the new delay in the anthrax program will not affect the guard's intent to complete vaccinations for 400 people already in the program.

The vaccination program was ordered in 1997 by Secretary of Defense William Cohen to protect service members from the biological warfare agent sprayed in the form of airborne spores by terrorists and enemy nations.

The mandatory effort to inoculate all U.S. armed service members has been criticized on several fronts by members of Congress such as U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., a federal watchdog agency and military advocacy groups.

Since the program began, at least 300 military personnel refusing the vaccine have been disciplined or removed dishonorably from the service, and others face disciplinary action. Scores of those vaccinated have complained of becoming seriously ill for months at a time.

The manufacturer, BioPort Corp., of Lansing, Mich., is owned in part by William Crowe, a former admiral and past head of the joint chiefs of staff. The company failed inspections of its former plant in 1997 and 1998, causing some of its vaccine lots to be voluntarily quarantined by the Defense Department.

The second phase of the vaccination program was contingent upon BioPort's passing the FDA plant inspection. Bioport built the new production facility after demolishing the smaller, state-regulated plant on the same site. The larger plant is needed to meet defense production requirements of some

400,000 dosages a month. The federal inspectors cited 30 deficiencies at the plant.

"The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's pre-approval inspection is simply one step in the overall process of approving our new facility," said Kelly Rossman, a spokesman for Bioport. "We fully support the FDA's role and continue to work closely with them to address each and every issue they have identified. We look forward to our final inspection and are confident that will receive FDA's approval at that time."