

ANTHRAX VACCINE INQUIRY SOUGHT
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State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal is calling for an inquiry into whether the anthrax vaccine being used to protect state National Guard troops from biological warfare complies with state and federal laws.

Thursday, state Consumer Protection Commissioner James Fleming confirmed that he had received a request from the attorney general for a joint inquiry into the vaccine.

Fleming said Blumenthal expressed concern about the health effects of the vaccine on the National Guard troops, who are state employees.

"I share his concern," Fleming said.

A request from the attorney general to consumer protection about a drug product is rare, Fleming said. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has primary jurisdiction over the manufacturing of the vaccine.

Blumenthal would not comment on his request, which was sparked by a complaint from two former Connecticut Air National Guard pilots, Maj. Russell Dingle and Maj. Thomas "Buzz" Rempfer. But the attorney general has previously raised concerns about potential liability to Connecticut caused by anthrax because the guardsmen are state employees. Although a deputy secretary of defense told Blumenthal the federal government is responsible for health care of sick troops, the attorney general said in March he agreed with a congressional report calling for suspension of the vaccination program.

Dingle and Rempfer resigned from the guard in January 1999 rather than take the vaccination, a series of six shots and a booster. They questioned the vaccine's safety and effectiveness, and have since led a nationwide movement to block use of the vaccine, which they believe has caused severe health problems with some service members.

Rempfer said he and Dingle are complaining that the vaccine was never validated by federal inspection, the manufacturing process was changed without federal approval, the manufacturer re-dated expired vaccine without federal approval and the product is adulterated and mislabeled. "This state inquiry will hopefully ensure that state military employees' health will be protected," he said.

The mandatory program to inoculate the nation's 2.4 million armed service members was announced by Secretary of Defense William Cohen in December 1997 and began several months later. At least 1,000 National Guard and reserve pilots and others have resigned or have announced plans to resign rather than take the vaccine.

Kelly Rossman-McKinney, a spokeswoman for Michigan-based BioPort Inc., manufacturer of the vaccine, said the company is "confident that the anthrax vaccine will meet the attorney general's and the consumer protection commissioner's requirements.

"We make a safe, pure and effective vaccine, and our manufacturers have done that for 30 years," she said.

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