

Senate Community Affairs Committee

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH PORTFOLIO

Additional Estimates 2015 - 2016, 10 February 2016

Ref No: SQ16-000338

OUTCOME: 9 - Biosecurity and Emergency Response

Topic: Biosecurity

Type of Question: Written Question on Notice

Senator: Abetz, Eric

Question:

What assurance can the Department of Health provide that all Australians can be and will be protected in the event of an outbreak of biological and chemical warfare within Australia?

Answer:

The Department of Health's health emergency preparedness planning and response policy is based on the level of risk posed in the Australian context and on the best available scientific evidence.

Current Australian Intelligence Community advice is that the risk of biological or chemical related terrorist attack in Australia is low.

Nonetheless if an incident were to occur the consequences could be high and Australia has preparedness measures in place and effective systems to respond.

Australia has a very effective health system including public health laboratories and surveillance systems that have the capability to rapidly detect and analyse biological agents of security concern. Across the Health sector there are well practiced and effective systems and relationships with the states and territories, through the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee and its Standing Committees, to ensure the effective coordination of a response to a health emergency.

The Department maintains the National Medical Stockpile, a strategic reserve of pharmaceuticals and personal protective equipment to boost Australia's response capability. The Stockpile currently holds products relevant to the response to a number of biological and chemical agents of security concern including vaccine, antibiotics and antidotes.

The Department administers the Security Sensitive Biological Agents Regulatory Scheme as a safeguard to minimise access to biological agents of security concern that could be used in acts of bioterrorism.

Australia has strict requirements for the import of biological materials under the Quarantine Act 1908 (to be superseded by the Biosecurity Act 2015 that comes into force on 16 June 2016).

Regulation of chemicals of security concern is the responsibility of the Attorney General's Department.