

# INDIANAPOLIS BUSINESS JOURNAL

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VOL. 23 NO. 25

SEPTEMBER 2-8, 2002

## *Finding bioterrorism through cough syrup*

# Drug sales could help detect attack

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IBJ Reporter

The quicker a doctor can treat someone exposed to a biological agent like anthrax, the better that person's chances are for survival.

But how do you find the victim soon enough? A patient is often gravely ill before the cause of his or her illness is discovered. A terrorist releasing a biological agent will probably do it silently, without warning.

"In a bioterrorism event, nothing lets you know that it's happening," said Peter Beering, associate general counsel for the Indianapolis Water Co. and a national terrorism and emergency preparedness expert.

An Indianapolis partnership of for-profit and not-for profit groups has developed a Web-based service it hopes can help.

Working with the Hudson Institute and two trade groups, Bracken Foster & Associates LLC of Indianapolis has developed a system that, because most people exposed to biological agents first exhibit flu-like symptoms, can track the amount of over-the-counter flu medication sold in drugstores, groceries and discount retailers.

"In the event of a bio-attack, the population would self-medicate," according to Todd Bracken, chairman and CEO of Bracken Foster.

Called BioSentinel, the system could identify an area where flu medication sales spike above normal statistical guidelines, then broadcast a warning to subscribing health care professionals and authorities.

That should allow doctors and hospitals to find and treat victims of a biological attack quicker, affording them precious time that could save lives.

"We are able to notify all groups that something odd is happening here," Bracken said. Notification would occur through telephone, pager or cell phone and BioSentinel employees would continue to try to contact a subscriber until they received an answer, he said.

That alert would, in all likelihood, come days ahead of any public health warning. Public health officials usually issue warnings only after learning of a confirmed case of a disease or biological agent outbreak, Bracken said.

BioSentinel has already attracted a few fans. When U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar heard about the system, he sent a letter to Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge encouraging him to take a look at the system.

Bracken developed BioSentinel in coordination with the Hudson Institute and trade groups Indiana's Health Industry and the Indiana Technology Partnership after a Hudson seminar on bioterrorism in January.

Members of each group talked after the seminar, and, Bracken said, "the general conclusion was, 'Why don't we do something about it?'"

Out of that discussion sprang a working group that looked at possible approaches, keeping two things in mind--the solution had to use current technology and should not require a customer/subscriber to add job responsibilities.

By using the Web-based system, BioSentinel doesn't require an additional purchase of software or other equipment and generates no additional paperwork.

The developers made another key decision about developing BioSentinel. Instead of seeking government or grant funding and waiting for the sometimes months-long process of obtaining money, the partnership developed the service on its own.

While not revealing specifics, Bracken said the investment in computer equipment and software was "over six

## Buying time against bioterrorism



1. Web-based system tracks sales of over-the-counter flu medications by major pharmacies.



2. If an unusual spike in sales occurs, an alert goes to subscribing health care professionals and authorities via telephone about possible biological agent exposure.



3. Health care professionals watch for patients who may have been exposed.

figures."

The next step will be attracting the broad depth of subscribers necessary to make the system truly effective. That will include convincing cash-strapped government agencies to get on board.

Bracken thinks government and health care providers will be able to afford BioSentinel. It won't cost a public agency any more than the annual salary of an intern, or about \$20,000, he said.

But Beering noted that operating and maintaining BioSentinel's complex computer infrastructure is one of several challenges its operators face.

BioSentinel is "not an inexpensive system," he said. In addition, competing drugstores and retailers may need assurances that none of their confidential information can be obtained through the system.

"We know this works," he said. "A similar system has been in place in New York for monitoring West Nile virus."

And he is thoroughly in favor of early-warning systems.

"I've been calling for this since before Sept. 11," he said.

Both Beering and Bracken said BioSentinel isn't the only answer for a bioterrorism event.

"Our intent from the beginning wasn't to solve all of the problems around bioterrorism," Bracken said. "Our goal was to say, 'What specific need can we address?'"