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Outside View: Forewarned is Forearmed

By Peter J. Pitts
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WASHINGTON, Sept. 7 (UPI) -- Shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, the Hudson Institute's Sarah Archer, a visiting fellow and consultant to the U.S. military, presented a seminar on the state of our national preparedness to combat a possible bioterrorist assault.

Archer argued that, in addition to the need for new and more sophisticated products, one of the most important variables needed to successfully combat a bioterrorist attack is time. Time as in early detection. Time as in early warning systems. Time as in emergency response coordination.

After the seminar concluded, representatives from the Hudson Institute, Bracken Foster & Associates, Indiana's Health Industry, and the Indiana Technology Partnership stayed on to discuss how they could conquer the need for new products, and particularly how they could help with early detection and intervention in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

"It was evident after Dr. Archer's talk that the events of 9/11 should be viewed as a wake-up call, accentuating the need for many new products that were crucially important but that simply didn't yet exist," said Todd Bracken, CEO of Bracken Foster & Associates. "Fortunately, the seminar had brought together people with the skills, knowledge, and contacts needed to seriously address the problem of bioterrorism and biosurveillance."

Focusing their energies on solving the variable of time, opportunities for a solution quickly emerged. The group focused their discussions on developing a process that would provide rapid pinpointing and early intervention -- the key to saving lives following a terrorist's release of a pathogenic agent.

At the group's next session, Jim Wheeler, president of the Indiana Technology Partnership and a former senior fellow at Hudson Institute, brought up his experience with information technology used to manage inventory control for prescription drugs.

He thought that, since many of the early symptoms of a bioterrorist attack would mimic the flu or other respiratory diseases, time could be saved by developing a methodology to identify unusual increases in prescriptions of certain medications. The group was intrigued, but realized that there were even earlier indicators that would prove more effective. "Forewarned is forearmed," said Wheeler. And that phrase became the motto for BIOSENTINEL.

"Unlike many of the prototypes I saw at the Homeland Security Expo in Washington, D.C., we chose to leverage existing information, technology, and processes as the basis for BIOSENTINEL," said Bracken. "And by leveraging existing processes and methodologies, we were able to accelerate the move from concept to commercialization. We also opted not to wait for government funding, because it would even further delay developing a solution."

Other groups, most notably scientists at Carnegie Mellon University, were pursuing similar paths. Carnegie Mellon researchers had investigated the early detection of anthrax outbreaks by tracking over-the-counter medication sales. The Indiana team was on the cutting edge of a valuable solution to a crucial problem.

After more discussion, the group theorized that if they could measure the purchases of certain categories of over-the-counter medications, they could identify a possible bioterrorist breach before it would become more widely apparent, allowing for earlier notification and intervention by the health care community -- and resulting in many more saved lives.

The group found a willing ally in CVS Pharmacies. CVS was willing to share store-level purchasing information after BIOSENTINEL demonstrated that its data exchange processes were able to disaggregate any proprietary marketing data. This new stream of information would not only provide data that would provide speedier identification of a possible "breach," but would also give the BioSentinel product the ability to issue zip code-specific alerts.

The BIOSENTINEL system also has an emergency response coordination mechanism that alerts all appropriate authorities and organizations tasked with proactive intervention and diagnostics. These groups are contacted immediately and simultaneously -- and BIOSENTINEL automatically seeks them out via e-mail, phone, pager, and fax until every message has been received and confirmed. "Hours save lives," said Bracken. "And days can save hundreds of lives." More detailed information on BIOSENTINEL can be found at www.biosentinel.net.

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