

NATIONAL BOARD FOR BIOSECURITY

CSIS Analyst: Staff, Resources Must Meet Needs of Agenda; International Reaction Key

WASHINGTON, March 5, 2004— A CSIS analyst made the following statement today about the newly created National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity:

Gerald Epstein, senior fellow for science and security, CSIS Homeland Security Program (202-775-3125; gepstein@csis.org): “Establishment of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) is an important step towards reducing the risk that legitimate scientific research will be misused by those who seek to develop biological weapons. However, the Board has an ambitious agenda. It must have sufficient staff and resources to give this subject the attention it deserves. One wild card will be the reaction of industry, which has so far been silent regarding the need for actions such as these.

The procedures that this new Board will recommend for overseeing life science research will formally pertain only to research done at institutions that accept government funding. However, these procedures, and other Board actions, represent an effort to establish a new standard of responsible conduct for research that has the inherent potential to be misused, no matter how legitimate its intent. Anyone conducting such research, whether federally funded or not, should aspire to the same high standards.

Another important reaction will be that of the international community. Through the actions of the NSABB, the research institutions under its guidance, and the scientific community, the United States will be taking a leadership position in defining the responsible conduct of life science research. Our international partners should not want to be left behind.

Finally, careful scrutiny must be given to any biological research deemed to require security classification from its inception, which is beyond the purview of the NSABB. Classified research inevitably raises questions, especially in an area such as this one in which the difference between legitimate defensive and illegal offensive activity can primarily be one of intent. Therefore, guidance and oversight procedures must be developed that are sufficiently comprehensive, independent, and consistent across government to assure that such any such research - even if it cannot be fully disclosed - is necessary and appropriate.”

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