

Preventing a Flu Pandemic

Researchers create a myriad of technologies to prevent a deadly outbreak

Quick read

Los Alamos researchers create technologies that detect and prevent global outbreaks of deadly pathogens such as influenza.

Los Alamos researchers are working to prevent a flu pandemic via multilateral science. A Laboratory researcher created a device that can be used to detect and track global outbreaks and migration patterns of potentially harmful pathogens. In related projects, scientists are developing a hand-held cartridge that can tell you immediately if you've contracted the flu. Early detection is key to recovery—more importantly, it could help contain a deadly influenza outbreak.

Influenza is one of the greatest bio threats and can be extremely deadly. In 1919, the Spanish flu killed nearly 50 million people.

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) researcher Torsten Staab invented a patented hand-held avian surveillance tool—the first ever—that allows researchers in the field to enter data and track movement. This tool has been called the “Holy Grail of clinical testing.”

The highly portable, small, rugged device is being used to track bird flu outbreaks in places such as Alaska, California, Russia, Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Canada, Ecuador, and parts of Africa. It features a touch screen with graphical user interface, digital camera, Global Positioning System, microphone, memory card slot, and wireless Bluetooth and WiFi communications.

“By improving field-data-acquisition practices, enabling and accelerating all-digital information sharing across organizational boundaries, I hope that this little device will help researchers and health-care officials around the world detect and track outbreaks and migration patterns of potentially harmful pathogens, such as H5N1, much faster and more easily,” Staab, who works in the Applied Engineering Technology Division, said.

Portable Flu Test Kit and Outbreak-Mapping Software

Collaborators in LANL’s Bioscience Division are attempting to construct a self-contained biochemistry lab—smaller than a deck of cards—to be an inexpensive, portable device that can be used by nearly anyone to detect harmful viruses. While the technology is sophisticated, it will be as easy to use as an at-home pregnancy test. The H5N1 avian influenza virus, or bird flu, is infecting and killing birds around the world. As with the Spanish flu virus, our immune system has no experience with H5N1. If the bird flu virus mutates and becomes easily transmissible between humans, the world would likely face another devastating pandemic.

The prototype dipstick, as this device is called, will detect not only the H5N1 influenza virus but also others that produce flu-like symptoms, such as respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) virus, and the common cold virus. However, its greatest advantage over current detectors is speed. Pandemics are fueled, in part, by a lack of timely information—the virus spreads before infected persons can be identified and properly quarantined. In today’s highly mobile society, early detection is imperative.

Los Alamos is also responsible for databases that gather and organize vast amounts of genomic information about AIDS, hepatitis C, and influenza, information that is used by

researchers around the world to identify pathogens and design strategies to thwart them. The dipstick team called on Staab, engineer of the world's first hand-held, disposable, DNA-based influenza detector, to help create the device.

The dipstick has caught the attention of an industrial manufacturer, who hopes to mass-produce the device at a projected retail cost of about \$10 per dipstick. If that happens, we can all start thinking about clearing a little shelf space in our medicine cabinets.

LANL researchers on the dipstick project included Hong Cai, Xiaoyun Lu, David Fox, Taraka Dale and Lei Chen.

"Eventually, we hope to be able to go from sample collection to results in less than an hour, even in patients who are not fully symptomatic," says David Fox, an Agnew National Security Postdoctoral Fellow formerly on the dipstick team. "That would give people an incredible head start for initiating response strategies."

Additionally, in efforts to stop a pandemic, scientists developed EpiCast, software that models infectious disease spread to help epidemiologists understand the spread and impact of an avian influenza pandemic. This software was created by Los Alamos scientists Tim Germann, Kai Kadau, and Catherine Macken.

With its unprecedented level of detail, EpiCast has been used to evaluate various medical and non medical mitigation strategies in the event of a pandemic influenza outbreak in the United States.

For decades, researchers did not know how the rapidly evolving influenza spread, but now they are getting the answers to help stop a deadly outbreak.

Pushing Frontiers

In the second half of 2008, Los Alamos National Laboratory made significant advances in its primary mission: safeguarding the U.S. nuclear deterrent and pushing the frontiers of science on multiple fronts.

The national stockpile stewardship program achieved a major milestone in September with the production of the first life-extended W76-1 ballistic missile warhead for Trident submarines. The achievement culminated more than a decade of work by scientists and engineers at Los Alamos and across the nuclear weapons complex-including two crucial experiments conducted by the Laboratory's Hydrodynamic Experiments Division.

Another highlight: Roadrunner reached a new performance record of 1.105 petaflops, keeping it atop the list of the world's fastest supercomputers. Built by IBM for the Lab, Roadrunner was the first computer to crack the petaflop barrier: one thousand TRILLION operations per second. Initial applications will range widely: studying in great detail the evolution of HIV... exploring deeply the formation—as well as deformation—of metallic nanowires...and-toward producing biofuels more efficiently-unraveling the processes by which bacteria break down cellulose.

Safety and environmental stewardship were again a major theme for our work in the latter half of 2008. In November, the last group of unvented high-activity drums left Los Alamos for the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad. That shipment fulfilled a commitment to the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board to prioritize disposal of the highest-activity transuranic wastes stored at the Lab.

Los Alamos also strengthened security, ensuring that nearly six dozen classified and unclassified computing systems are managed and operated securely. The Lab has now complied with all 14 security actions mandated two years ago by the Department of Energy. And, through our program to recruit cognizant systems engineers, we met the crucial need for sufficient numbers of engineers to keep vital mechanical and electrical safety systems functioning properly in our nuclear facilities.

The latter half of 2008 proved once again why Los Alamos is the nation's premier institution for scientific research. Capping the list of accomplishments was a new technology called MagViz that could eventually provide increased security at major airports. Based on medical MRI technology, MagViz can identify contents of bottles and other containers, distinguishing potentially hazardous liquids from the harmless shampoos and perfumes a traveler might carry onboard a jet. MagViz was demonstrated successfully in December at Albuquerque's airport.

We continued a long tradition of supporting U.S. space exploration. A NASA mission, launched in October to probe the far edge of the solar system from a high Earth orbit, carried a Los Alamos device called the High Energy Neutral Atom Imager. Its goal: to detect atoms emitted from a region where the outermost reaches of our solar system meet the vast interstellar space-giving us a panoramic view of this gateway to the galaxy.

Closer to home, Los Alamos continues to explore solutions to the energy needs of tomorrow. For example, scientists at the Lab hope to use tiny semiconductors called quantum dots to convert sunlight to electricity more efficiently than is possible with current solar panels-and to create new, efficient solid-state lighting.

Equally electrifying, Los Alamos materials scientists are helping unravel the mysteries of superconductivity. During the latter half of the year, LANL researchers identified entirely new mechanisms for superconductivity that could form the basis for new superconducting materials.

Underscoring the wealth of scientific talent at the Lab, Bob Albers, Paul Johnson, and Kurt Sickafus were named Laboratory Fellows in December. These three Fellows represent diverse disciplines, including theoretical physics, energy science, and geophysics.

Los Alamos may be one of the world's great technology incubators, yet we also strive to help others develop new ideas and products. In January, the Lab selected four young local companies as the newest recipients of awards from the LANS Venture Acceleration Fund. LANS, which manages and operates the Lab, supports the fund through donations from its earnings.

The Lab and LANS also teamed last September with a venture capital firm and a local venture capital fund to spin off technology developed by Lab scientists, with an emphasis on creating companies in Northern New Mexico. The Lab could contribute up to one million dollars to the initiative over the first three years.

We also are pushing to build top-flight research facilities for the future. In July 2008, workers hoisted the final steel beam atop the skeleton of what will be the Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building, part of the Lab's Chemistry and Metallurgy Research Replacement Project. Once completed, the CMRR nuclear facility will house several of the Lab's mission-critical projects, including analytical chemistry, materials characterization, and actinide research and development capabilities. They'll be relocated from their current location in the historic-and-antiquated-Chemical and Metallurgy Research building at Technical Area 3.

In December, Los Alamos welcomed hundreds of employees who transferred from KSL, the subcontractor whose work the Lab brought in-house. The move was geared to improve efficiency and reduce costs associated with site-support services, including maintenance, waste removal, and custodial work.

Throughout the Lab's history, Los Alamos has helped play a vital role in the surrounding communities, and in 2008, that tradition continued. Lab employees pledged a million dollars, and LANS matched one hundred percent: a record Los Alamos contribution to United Way of TWO MILLION dollars. Contributions from the Lab and LANS also helped fund dozens of nonprofit organizations and scholarship programs, including a LANS donation of \$500,000 to a LANL Foundation scholarship named for former long-time New Mexico Senator Pete Domenici.

These accomplishments and many more added up to a strong year. Our customer, the National Nuclear Security Administration, reached the same conclusion in its very favorable assessment of the Lab's performance for fiscal year 2008. It's unmistakable: the extraordinary talent, commitment, and creativity that Los Alamos employees dedicate every day to national security science and the betterment of their communities.

About Our Capabilities, Facilities, and Staff

"Los Alamos National Laboratory plays an indispensable role in building America as a science and technology powerhouse, and our staff are an incredible resource to the nation and the world." Michael Anastasio, Dir.

Solving Complex R&D Problems with Special Blend of Staff, Capabilities and Facilities
Now in its seventh decade, LANL is one of the few laboratories that can bring great breadth of fundamental and discovery science, technology, and engineering rapidly together to create tangible solutions for national security needs.

Our staff, working with partners throughout science and industry, must be able to deliver today's solutions while maintaining the depth of capabilities to deliver the next generation of discoveries.

Los Alamos has demonstrated a cycle of innovation where we have developed world-leading capabilities and facilities in response to urgent, unique missions. Our new discoveries continue to respond to emerging missions.

Being able to integrate and apply our capabilities rapidly to new challenges will be a key

advantage in an increasingly competitive landscape.

Our Science, Technology and Engineering Priorities
Science that Matters

Information science and technology enabling integrative and predictive science
Experimental science focused on materials for the future
Fundamental forensic science for nuclear, biological, and chemical threats

How We Work

Collaborate, partner and team to make decisive contributions to our sponsors
Outstanding operational excellence for safety, security, and efficient pursuit of ST&E
for our missions

Transform Our Scientific Campus

Campus for 2020 (consistent with complex transformation)
Modern science facilities: LANSCE refurbishment, CMR replacement, Science Complex
Signature facilities