

## INVESTIGATOR PERSPECTIVE

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Let me preface this by saying that in addition to being a professor at the University of Chicago and having the responsibility of running a laboratory involved in select agent research, I also function at this time as a chair of the Department of Microbiology, so I'm responsible for appointments of administrative staff as well as research staff as it pertains to the Howard T. Ricketts laboratory, which is a Regional Biocontainment Laboratory Level 3.

In terms of entry into select agent laboratories, we get applicants for positions that are advertised for scientists, staff scientists, technicians, and graduate students, as well as fellows that have an interest in entering our select agent laboratory. Our practice is that we never let anybody into a BSL-3 laboratory virtually from the street. It's actually a very complicated system where technicians at minimum have to work for several months before we actually let them into a biosafety laboratory.

Before we arrive at some judgment as to whether or not an applicant might be appropriate to enter these biosafety laboratories, we get an evaluation from the applicants' peers as well as an evaluation of their scientific performance. If entrance is deemed appropriate, there is a training program and a peer review program in addition to all the classroom training that must first occur. And once our scientists run through this, we get a peer review response as to whether or not they might be suitable.

This judgment that we arrive at is not a failsafe. Errors can be made and some people that looked okay in the beginning eventually may turn out not to be okay anymore and they're no longer comfortable having to work in a biosafety laboratory. In conjunction with the responsible official, we then--in terms of the investigators working on this --very quickly arrive at a decision to remove access. That does not mean that we will terminate the employment. We will just re-employ that particular individual. And in this manner we create, also through the performance reviews, a stream of information that allows us to hopefully arrive at a degree of comfort for each individual. The program has grown over the past ten years and now we're looking at dozens of people that have to run through this. So, as the program grows and generates more and more individuals with experience in this, we now also are in the position where we can provide recommendations for those individuals that then leave.

So, as the chair of the Department of Microbiology at the University of Chicago, we are looking at about 20 percent of our research staff that will leave the institution per year. And the technicians typically will go to graduate school, the graduate students will become fellows, and the fellows will want to become faculty. So the evaluations that we provide for them in the first place is a scientific assessment. In the letters I provide an interpretation of the scientific performance as well as the collegiality and the performance in the laboratory. Because the letters are not sent in some haphazard manner into empty space, they are solicited letters, I actually have to look very carefully at what people ask for when they're requesting a letter. And this has changed. And I think Sam Miller alluded to this. There has been great inflation in letters, in performance evaluations, and the question really is what should be in these letters.

So in the last few years I find specific elements that must be addressed in order for the letter to be valid, often, for example, strengths and weaknesses. If I declare that there are absolutely no weaknesses for a particular candidate, that sounds too good to be true. So, it causes me to ponder and ask what is it that

I could identify as potential problems that have to be worked around and what solutions were found to do this. In so doing I've never had feedback from an institution that the judgment that I provided for a candidate was wrong. Either that is due to the fact that all my letters are excellent and "on the money;" or because my colleagues are very collegial and they just don't engage in this type of practice. While I like to think that my letters are pretty good, I also think the second point is certainly true.

Now, while very often the institutions provide some information that tells me that this letter will be held in the strictest confidence possible, I more often than not find that that is not true. And candidates for promotion appointment have a way of figuring out what is in this letter. And for all of those in this room that have to provide letters, my advice to you is when you write this letter be prepared for this to be seen not just by a committee but also by the candidate, and it should not be a document that would reveal malicious intent.

So having said that, yes, I do pass judgment on people that I work with, many of whom I have worked with for many years. I know them very well and they have to know that they have strengths and weaknesses, and I pride myself on identifying that. Having said that, however, I don't also leverage comments of the kind as "never employ this type of candidate." I would prefer to decline writing a letter if that was the case.

So this now will enter a new era where I fear that people will want to ask in terms of biosecurity what do I think about these particular individuals. This has not arrived yet on the letter scale. I have yet to receive an inquiry from institutions of BSL-3/BSL-4 programs that will want to know what we think about this. I know that if that happens, and I presume considering our deliberations here, that will happen in the not too far distant future, I will certainly run to HR and this will become a legal issue. I don't feel comfortable passing these kinds of comments about biosecurity simply because they would have to be met with a certain factual arrangement.

Now, having said that, there may be candidates where there is a problem. I want to resonate the points that were brought up earlier-- if you have a reasonable suspicion that somebody could be a huge threat to the public, I think one has to act on this and if these people sought employment elsewhere, we, as a community, would have to act on this. And that puts the spotlight back on the person who provides the reference. Unfortunately, in Chicago that is going to have to be me. I'm going to have to speak up to help protect the public from these individuals.