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Call for law to control laboratory poisons

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By Marcel Berlins and
Pearce Wright

A serious risk to public health and safety from the use of microorganisms in teaching research and industrial laboratories is described in the latest issue of the *New Law Journal*.

It is contained in an article by Dr Brian J. Ford, an independent consultant at the Science Unit, Cardiff, in which he calls for legislation for protection against poisons more dangerous than some of the drugs and chemicals that are subject to stringent legislation.

The list of chemicals under restricted use ranged from the deadly arsenical poisons and cyanide to many milder substances, including codeine. Yet there were virulent poisons produced by cultures of living organisms in laboratories for which no legal safety provisions had been made.

Among these dangerous agents Dr Ford includes the lethal toxins produced by the botulism organism *Clostridium botulinum* and the tularemia organism *Pasteurella tularensis*. Less than 14 oz of either of these agents as a pure extract is theoretically capable of destroying the whole population of the world.

Dr Ford argues that the risks have increased with the extension of biology courses in colleges and schools which include the prin-

ciples of bacteriology. Many comparatively simple strains of bacteria are isolated in culture using these techniques, and some of them can prove dangerous to health.

One of this category mentioned by Dr Ford, *Staphylococcus aureus*, is a common bacterium found on the skin, and similar strains that could produce diphtheria or severe respiratory diseases.

He believes that there are even wider implications in the use of microorganisms in modern industrial processes. The sort of agents involved in the manufacture of enzyme detergents is an example. He has proposed the scope of the legislation considered necessary.

It would involve allocating certain micro-organisms to schedules similar to those in force under the poisons and pharmacy legislation. The highly virulent ones comparable with Schedule A drugs would include the bacteria that are causative organisms of diseases such as plague, tuberculosis and diphtheria.

Species of organisms known to cause disease but more widely distributed in the environment would come under Schedule B. The purpose would be to limit the access of junior untrained or casual staff to places where culture work was allowed.