

# No law for bacteria

<sup>Obs</sup>  
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<sup>PM</sup>  
A mass of complex legislation governs the use of dangerous drugs and chemicals, radioactive materials, industrial acids, even antibiotics and vaccines. Yet there is no law covering the handling and use of bacteria and virus cultures.

In recent years we have seen several near-escape situations (such as Lassa Fever in 1969, and the German Monkey Disease in 1967) where laboratory workers had become infected. The risks to the community are considerable.

Cases have come to my notice where technical staff handle pathogens to which they have not been immunised. Whereas isotopes have to be kept under conditions of strict security, bacterial cultures are handled under less careful circumstances which could have incalculable consequences.

As I showed in my recent textbook, 'Microbiology and Food,' even the word 'sterile' has half a dozen quite distinct meanings which could cause dangerous ambiguity. Perhaps a new 'germ law' could clear this up, too.

We are now teaching culture techniques in schools. There is little to stop children carrying out experiments that could have hazardous implications to themselves and others. And in an age of growing political militancy, what restrictions do we have that could prevent the misuse of organisms for an ideal aimed against society?

There is no restriction that prevents the most lethal organism from being carried about in the street, or stored in conditions where infection becomes a real risk. We still have no practical cure for any virus disease, and many bacteria have developed or acquired an immunity to antibiotics to which they were previously sensitive. It is high time the law was strengthened in this regard.

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