

Disease 'risk' in labs

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By our own Reporter

A call for laws to prevent a world epidemic breaking out by misuse of deadly micro-organisms was made yesterday in the "New Law Journal."

Mr Brian Ford, a scientific consultant at the Science Unit, Cardiff, points out that there are no laws to stop a man walking in a crowded street with a pocketful of two toxins, 14 ounces of which could kill the entire world population.

The toxins he names are botulinus — named by one novelist "The Satan Bug"— which causes acute food poisoning and pasteurilla. Neither is covered by the Poisons Act because they derive from the cultures of living organism. But the US is to destroy its germ warfare stocks of both, recognising that they are as dangerous as chemical weapons.

Discussing the risk of laboratory accidents, Mr Ford says: "The potential hazards of an epidemic are considerable— particularly when we realise that there is no drug of any kind which may be used in the treatment of a virus infection, or that has antiviral proclivities sufficient to make such a development likely in the near future."

He adds that we are producing "incalculable numbers" of other micro-organisms, including the protein - digesting enzymes included in household detergents. Production will become significantly greater in the near future and will pose new problems.

Mr Ford suggests a five-part law to control this microbiological revolution. It would impose restrictions on the number and type of people given access to cultures. There would also be codes of professional conduct for the handling, labeling, and disposal of cultures, and safeguards on the disposal of bodies of people who might have died after contact.