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PanThera gets grant to study anthrax

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'Aiea-based PanThera Biopharma LLC recently won a \$2.5 million, 2 1/2-year grant to continue research aimed at developing a drug to prevent infection by anthrax.

The small-business innovation research grant will be disbursed by the Department of Health and Human Services beginning June 15. It continues an eight-year research project that began in 2002.

"PanThera is in the front lines of developing a medical response to bioterrorism and pandemic threats, and its research has the potential of being of significant value for public safety," said U.S. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye in a news release announcing the grant.

"The American public is already quite aware of the danger that an anthrax attack can pose."

PanThera's work does not involve any live anthrax organisms, said Panthera President Will Alameida.

Work on the non-infectious anthrax components will be conducted in a controlled laboratory setting, he said.

PanThera was formed in August when Honolulu-based STI Industries Inc. bought Hawaii Biotech's infectious disease and small molecule drug discovery programs.

PanThera Biopharma also is working on drug developments against the dengue virus.

Locally the dengue virus, West Nile virus and several hantavirus strains already have been brought into the Islands for research purposes by state and private agencies. The SARS virus also has been approved but not yet imported.

In addition, the state has given permission to import three unidentified microorganisms, including two human pathogens, that remain secret because they are seen as potential bioterrorist threats.

Use of these viruses is tightly controlled and poses little risk to the public, according to researchers. However, the work has raised concerns about increased risks to the health of Hawai'i residents and the state's \$12 billion tourism trade should an accidental release occur.

Humans can become infected with anthrax by handling products from infected animals. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifies anthrax as having a high potential for use as a bioterrorism treat.

In most cases, early treatment with antibiotics can cure cutaneous anthrax. Even if untreated, 80 percent of people who become infected with cutaneous anthrax do not die, according to the CDC.

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