

64th World Health Assembly Gives Smallpox a Temporary Stay of Execution

On May 16th, the 64th World Health Assembly (WHA) opened with questions about the fate of one of the world's deadliest killers: smallpox. For the last week, the WHA has been discussing topics of health issues around the world, including the eventual destruction of the last known stocks of the smallpox virus. Today, the WHA gave smallpox another stay of execution, at least temporarily. After a near stalemate and a long wait, the WHA has finally reached a compromise. World Health Organization (WHO) member nations voted today at the WHA to destroy the remaining stockpiles of the smallpox virus, but the actual date of destruction is postponed for a decision at the 67th World Health Assembly in 2014.

For several centuries, smallpox killed about one-third of the people it infected, but it was eradicated from the environment three decades ago. The last confirmed case of naturally occurring smallpox was in Somalia in 1977 after a global effort by the WHO to contain the smallpox virus and eventually destroy it. The last known case of smallpox was in 1978, in Britain, after a deadly laboratory accident. Less than two years later, the WHO declared the disease eradicated.¹ In 1996, the WHO nations first agreed at the 49th WHA that smallpox, currently confined to WHO laboratories in the United States and Russia, should be destroyed. However, the WHA lacks the power to enforce the decision, and the United States and Russia have strongly opposed the final destruction of the last known samples of the smallpox virus.

For the past week, the fate of the smallpox virus was a key topic at the 64th WHA held at the UN's European Headquarters. Some of the WHO's member countries again pushed for a date to destroy the virus. At the beginning of this week, it seemed that this fifth attempt would result in another delay. For over two decades, the WHO's 193 member states have been deadlocked on the question about the need to preserve the samples. Each attempt to decide the fate of smallpox has ended in repeated delays to give scientists more time to develop safer smallpox vaccines and drugs. Without the vaccine "the world has no immunity to smallpox whatsoever," according to U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary, Kathleen Sebelius.

The strongest arguments for keeping the smallpox virus are deterrence, research, and response. The United States and Russia have expressed concerns that keeping laboratory samples of the virus counters the threat of germ warfare, the proposed five-year extension would allow for more research, and maintaining the samples would allow countries to produce vaccines in the event it was used as a biological weapon. The United State position is clear: non-compliant countries may still have unknown collections of the smallpox virus that were never transferred to the secure WHO laboratories because no one has ever verified if every nation voluntarily complied with the WHO's efforts. Sebellius argued the United States is concerned that smallpox "still exists outside the official laboratories and could be released intentionally or used as a virus weapon" and believes that the possibility of a future biological threat demands more tests with the virus. Russia's envoy cited concern over the efficiency of the current vaccines and warned that "destruction is irreversible."² Repeatedly the United States is criticized for wanting to keep the deadly virus for research, but Dr. Nils Saulaire, a U.S. representative, stated that "We do

¹ <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/smallpox/en/index.html>

² http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20110523/hl_afp/whohealthassembly_20110523175150

favor the eventual destruction of the stocks once the primary goals of research have been achieved. We don't think it's a never-ending process.”³

Countries in favor of destroying smallpox, mostly developing nations that have been racked by the virus, disagree. They argue that killing the virus is the only way to be safe from its threat, research has been ongoing with no end in sight, and there are vaccines stockpiles at a WHO location in Switzerland to protect against future threats. In an unusual move, Iran called for a vote on the issue, which was denied. As expected, the United States argued for a five-year stay on decisions about the destruction, which was supported by several nations including the European Union (EU), Canada and Israel. Approximately twenty countries, many of them developing countries, fought for the virus's immediate destruction, citing a lack of scientific need for the virus. At a news conference last week for the WHA, Sebellius stated, "let me be clear, we are committed to the eventual destruction of the virus stocks." But an Iranian diplomat wants more from the WHA stating that "it has been 30 years since we agreed to keep the stocks. It is about time to fix a definitive date" for their elimination.⁴

The eventual destruction of the virus will be up for discussion again in 2014.

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³ <http://empowerednews.net/smallpox-virus-samples-saved-to-thwart-terror-attacks-u-s/188550/>.

⁴ http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20110523_4492.php.