

**Embargo Tuesday 29 October 2002**  
**Spy vs Spy: the science of surveillance and security**  
**Session 6: 2.45pm Securing our shores**



The Science Forums

Presentation: Plague on board  
Dr Annabelle Duncan  
CSIRO

- *key words/terms: biosecurity*
- *applications: agriculture, farming, health, import and export industries*

### **Plague on board**

Biosecurity - a word originally used to describe the accidental introduction of agricultural diseases or non-native pests now has a new public emphasis.

Since anthrax scares in America last year, biosecurity has incorporated the intentional or unintentional introduction of organisms that can damage human health as well as the environment.

But biosecurity is not new.

Sailing ships once flew yellow flags proclaiming "Plague on board". Beagles that for years have bounced over suitcases at airports highlight steps taken to protect Australia from incursion of biological agents.

As an island nation we have traded on our relatively disease free status for many years and have a strong economic stake in maintaining this standing.

While the events of the past 12 months have alerted us all to the possibility of the intentional introductions of disease, we do need to ensure that we retain some perspective in deciding how to handle potential problems.

### **Little difference**

I contend that there is little difference in dealing with intentional breaches of biosecurity and natural breaches of biosecurity.

If we are well prepared to deal with accidental breaches by having a good public health system and strong emergency response measures in place, we are well equipped to deal with disease outbreaks, whatever their origin.

It is vital that Australia maintains its continued emphasis on biosecurity and those efforts are not distracted by threats of bioterrorism.

### **Safe Australia**

CSIRO, along with AQIS and Customs, plays a major role in maintaining a Safe Australia. It is currently looking at whether there are new technologies that should be developed to help in this fight.

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### **Profile**

Dr Annabelle Duncan is an adviser to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on biological weapons control and in this capacity has represented Australia at international arms control meetings. Awarded a Public Service Medal in 1996 for this work, she has also acted as a biological weapons inspector with the United Nations in Iraq.

After graduating from New Zealand's Otago University with a MSc in 1978, and from La Trobe University with a PhD in 1986, the focus of her postgraduate studies was water and wastewater microbiology.

In 1989 she joined CSIRO working in the fields of microbiology of wastewater treatment and later in microbial production of pharmaceuticals. Dr Duncan moved into science management in 1997 and became Chief of Molecular Science in July 1999.

Dr Duncan is a Member of the Australian Society for Microbiology, Ausbiotech and the Pugwash Disarmament Group.

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