COLE: Terror medicine can save lives

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COMMENTARY:
Critics of U.S. biosecurity policy contend that the threat of terrorism has been overblown and that too much money is going to biodefense and related programs. The $6 billion-odd now spent annually in this area will doubtless be scrutinized by the new Obama administration. But the threat remains real.

While some cuts may be justified, education and training in the new field of terror medicine warrants full support. Terror medicine concerns not only biological agents like anthrax, but the medical management of terrorist attacks regardless of the weapon. In fact, bombs and explosives have been the weapons most commonly used by terrorists.

The emergence of terror medicine as a distinctive discipline has been prompted by the global proliferation of terrorism especially since the end of the 20th century. It involves anyone who would be called to service during or after a terror incident - from emergency responders to long-term caregivers. Yet ironically, most physicians and other health providers, let alone members of the public, are still unfamiliar with many of its features.

Confusion among rescue workers and ambulance drivers meant some victims were still awaiting transportation to a hospital four hours after the explosions. Advance planning for terrorist and disaster events is an essential element of terror medicine. Another is the unique approach to patient care posed by terrorist attacks, especially suicide bombings. Close-quarter victims often suffer burns, crushed bones, ruptured eardrums and intestines, and penetrations from nails that were packed with the explosives. Accidents or other acts of violence rarely produce combinations of these wounds in a single individual.

Yet, in a suicide bombing, scores of people may suffer most or all of these injuries. In such a situation, trauma surgeons typically are unprepared to make informed determinations about treatment priorities. While some cuts may be justified, education and training in the new field of terror medicine warrants full support.

The increase in terror incidents also has raised novel ethical questions. "For example, doctors in societies like Israel, which have experienced many such attacks, Israeli doctors can now make rapid credible decisions about which injuries to treat first and which can wait, a skill that is essential to saving lives. Still another area of the new discipline involves treating the emotional effects of terror incidents, which commonly are more intense than other traumatic events. After an automobile accident, for example, survivors may benefit from group therapy in which they share feelings about their stressful experience. But group interaction after a terror incident could heighten emotional turmoil. This has happened to victims who were surrounded by smoke and saw nothing. They became distraught when hearing others describe what they saw, like the dismembered head of the suicide bomber, says Israeli psychiatrist Esti Galili."

The increase in terror incidents also has raised novel ethical questions regarding medical responses: Should a critically wounded terrorist receive care ahead of victims who may be less severely injured? Is delaying a pregnant woman from reaching a hospital justifiable to search her for concealed explosives, even if she seems in acute need of medical attention? These and similar conundrums are only beginning to be explored by bioethicists.

The November terror attack in Mumbai is the most recent demonstration of the need for a broad understanding of terror medicine. An Indian journalist, Jagdish Singh, observed that the event showed many inadequacies in India's response including delayed arrivals of paramedics and other rescue personnel, and unavailability of medical supplies and equipment. These lapses all worsened the effects of the tragedy.

Since the jetliner attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, and the...
subsequent anthrax attacks via the mail, this country has become better
tested and more prepared. But many hospitals and response personnel remain inadequately
prepared. These deficiencies should be remedied by education, rehearsals and
understanding the distinctive challenges posed by terrorist attacks. The
more that individuals and institutions become familiar with the issues
concerning terror medicine, the greater the protection they can provide
themselves and others.

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His recent books include "Terror: How Israel Has Coped and What
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