

**Joint Committee on the Environment,  
Natural Resources and Agriculture**

State Legislature  
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

June 9, 2005

Gardiner Auditorium, State House

Re: An Act to Protect the Public Health and Environment from Toxic Biological Agents

**Comments by Sheldon Krimsky, Ph.D.**

Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to present my views on the bill before you that would amend the General Laws to establish public health guidelines for the operation of BSL-4 biological laboratories.

My name is Sheldon Krimsky. I am a professor in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University and a volunteer member of the Board of the Council for Responsible Genetics—a public interest organization that monitors the social and environmental impacts of biotechnology. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am a graduate of Boston University.

The bill before you is consistent with a growing trend across the country toward public accountability of research facilities that operate with pathogenic biological agents and/or toxic chemicals. I documented this trend in a report to the US Congress through its Office of Technology Assessment.

In 1976 and again in 1980 I was a member of a citizens' committee established by the City of Cambridge to review the risks of laboratory research. The Cambridge Experimentation Review Board recommended the establishment of a city biohazards committee for the purpose of overseeing potentially hazardous research in both the university and company labs expanding throughout the city. Far from pushing away science and industry, the Cambridge ordinance that established public accountability for the growing biotechnology industry brought stability, public trust, and a large concentration of new firms that sought to locate in the city.

I would like to echo the words of the citizens who addressed these issues in 1976:

“While we should not fear to increase our knowledge of the world, to learn more of the miracle of life, we citizens must insist that in the pursuit of knowledge appropriate safeguards be observed by institutions undertaking the research. Knowledge, whether for its own sake or for its potential benefits to humankind,

cannot serve as a justification for introducing risks to the public unless an informed citizenry is willing to accept those risks.” Recommendations of the Cambridge Experimentation Board to the Commissioner of Health and Hospitals, December 21, 1976.

The bill before you is filled with the requisite checks and balances and independent community participation that are appropriate for managing an ultra- high biological containment facility. It allows the community to voice concern about future research that may be inappropriate even for a BL-4 facility when it is located in a densely populated urban center. It also assures that there is transparency about the nature of the research. In the mid-1980s, I headed a commission to review the risks and benefits of government sponsored research at an Arthur D. Little laboratory in Cambridge involving chemical warfare agents. The city commission decided it was too risky. That decision was upheld by the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth. Informed consent, an important doctrine in human subject’s research, is also being applied to hazardous research in communities. That is the spirit of this legislation.

Respectfully submitted,

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