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Ethical Issues Surrounding Incidental Findings in Biodefense Research

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In the area of biodefense research, minimal attention has been paid to the ethics of addressing, handling, or disclosing incidental findings. Currently, scientists and publishers are left with the task of regulating what information is disseminated to the public with little guidance. Incidental findings in research have generated rigorous debate in the areas of neuroscience and genetics and a large body of research has addressed the ethical responsibilities of researchers in these areas. Incidental findings in biodefense can potentially have a massive impact on society. In 2001, while attempting to identify an immunocontraceptive by using the ectromelia virus (mousepox), researchers incidentally discovered a way to increase the virulence of this virus. After publication, some individuals feared this was essentially an outline for terrorists to create a new, even more dangerous, strain of smallpox. This kind of research presents the difficult task of balancing ethical responsibility to advance scientific knowledge by publication and information sharing, with potential risks to national security and public health. The purpose of this project was to identify the major ethical issues surrounding dissemination of incidental findings in biodefense research. In addition to examining the ethical issues in biodefense research, this involved exploring current literature in incidental finding in other fields (specifically neuroscience and genetics) to gain a better understanding of how this topic has been addressed. Using past research, this project attempts to address the issue of where the responsibility should lie in handling incidental findings.