12-19-2002


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Dec. 19, 2002

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USF St. Petersburg Awarded Grant to Assist in U.S. Bioterrorism Preparedness

The Science Journalism Center at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg is partnering with researchers at two other universities on a $326,143 federal bioterrorism grant to improve national preparedness.

The research aims to develop strategies and create adaptable messages that public health agencies can use to disseminate information to the media and public in situations involving biological weapons. The grant was one of four awarded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, which ranked this proposal the highest of all submitted.

Dr. Kristen Alley Swain, coordinator of the Science Journalism Center, is a co-principal investigator on the grant, titled “Targeted Pre-Event Message Development for Weapons of Mass Destruction Threats.” Dr. Thomas Mason, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the USF College of Public Health in Tampa, also is a co-principal investigator.

University of Alabama-Birmingham, Tulane University and USF are collaborating on projects about biological weapons preparedness, while three other CDC grant recipients are focusing on other preparedness issues, including chemical weapons, mental health issues and explosions/mass casualty events.

Swain’s proposal received $37,800 to analyze media coverage of the anthrax crisis, interview journalists who covered the story and Florida public health experts who were interviewed during the situation, and help the news media and public health agencies develop clearer messages for the public about actual risks surrounding reports of bioterrorism.

Swain also will teach a spring seminar, “Bioterrorism and the Media,” in which students will assist in carrying out the anthrax case study, as well as a summer seminar in which students will conduct community focus groups to test prototype materials.

Swain received her Ph.D. in mass communication in 1999 from the University of Florida. Her dissertation focused on communicating AIDS information through African-American churches. She has written and done research extensively on the treatment of science and technology issues by the news media.

For more information, contact Dr. Swain at (727) 553-1042.