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**By Jennifer Gollan**

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# *Lab Fight Raises U.S. Security Issues*

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Synthetic biology — which includes the development of fuels, organ tissue and tumor-destroying bacteria — became a focus of government and law enforcement agencies after 9/11 and the anthrax attacks that quickly followed it. The field’s “extraordinary promise,” a presidential commission concluded in December, is accompanied by “potential risks” to humans and the environment.

Even worse, it is possible that such designer organisms could fall into the hands of a “deranged individual or terrorist, who could create and release a deadly virus, said Richard H. Ebright, a professor of chemistry and chemical biology at Rutgers University. The potential for such a chain of events has cast a pall over the discipline, he said.

A dispute at the Synthetic Biology Engineering Research Center, a prominent coalition of biology labs that is led by the University of California, Berkeley, illustrates the potentially dangerous consequences of the research. At the heart of the controversy is a biosafety expert who resigned last summer amid complaints that the coalition was not doing enough to prevent a biological disaster.

The expert, Paul M. Rabinow, an anthropology professor at Berkeley, was hired to evaluate the security and ethical ramifications of the center’s research and report his findings to the top administrators. (The National Science Foundation, which granted about \$23.3 million to SynBERC, has required the coalition to include research focused on the ethical, security and social aspects of its work.)