



Mail screening matters: 2001 US Anthrax Letters

Anonymous mailings of anthrax in the US left several dead and many more affected after letters were sent to media companies and senators in 2001. Since then, it's been considered a worst-case scenario for what can happen when suspicious packages delivered to an organisation's site slip through the net. As organisations are still at risk of receiving such mail, it's also a reminder that this is a very real threat.

That's why the Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) has launched a campaign to highlight the importance of mail security. If a similar attack were to happen again, it could result in severe business disruption, the closure of facilities, or even the loss of lives.

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, envelopes containing threatening letters and *Bacillus anthracis* spores (which cause the disease anthrax) were sent to several US news media offices. One of these mailings led to the country's first anthrax death in 25 years.

More letters were posted, targeting two senators and several other media outlets. By November 2001, five people had died from contracting anthrax, including two postal workers. Many others became seriously ill.

Media reporting indicated that in the aftermath of the deaths, the US Postal Service purchased nearly 5 million masks and 88 million gloves for its employees, while services at 300 postal facilities were disrupted as they tested for traces of anthrax. Thousands of postal and government employees that might have been exposed to the bacteria were also given antibiotics as a precaution.

US federal prosecutors eventually found that a scientist employed in the government's bio-defence laboratories was responsible for the attacks, though his motives were unclear. Despite his arrest, the attack caused US mail services to face up to the severe consequences associated with threats by mail. Many postal facilities had to close for decontamination, with one building taking three years to reopen, at a cost of tens of millions of dollars.

CPNI encourage organisations to consider their own mail screening and security practices. CPNI's "Mail Screening Matters" campaign provides tools and resources to increase awareness around postal security and help reduce the risk and impact of suspicious mail. Search for more information on mail screening and security at www.cpni.gov.uk