

## Feds work to secure potential 'dirty bomb' source

By Mimi Hall, USA TODAY

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WASHINGTON — A new government program aims to make it more difficult for terrorists to steal dangerous radioactive material from the nation's hospitals and medical research labs to make "dirty bombs."

About 1,300 machines in medical facilities will be fitted with new security measures by the end of next year that will make it much harder for anyone to steal the **cesium chloride** inside, officials at the Homeland Security and Energy departments said. The machines use the material to irradiate blood, primarily for cancer patients.

The **cesium** contained in just one machine would be enough for a terrorist to make a radioactive bomb, said Vayl Oxford, head of Homeland Security's Domestic Nuclear Detection Office. The new program "takes a potential threat off the table," he said.

Although there is no immediate or credible threat, government security officials have long been concerned that terrorists will set off "dirty bombs" in the nation's cities. A dirty bomb would not kill many people, but it would wreak havoc and contaminate streets and buildings.

Concerns about hospital security took on new urgency last year when government "red teams" were able to break into irradiation machines in as little as two minutes, Oxford said. The retrofitted machines "will help keep potentially dangerous material safe and secure from theft or misuse," said Thomas D'Agostino of the Energy Department's National Nuclear Security Administration. That agency is splitting the cost — up to \$3,000 per machine — with Homeland Security.

Rep. Jim Langevin, D-R.I., of the House Homeland Security Committee, praised the effort. "A handful of radioactive substances have legitimate medical and commercial uses ... and the most effective way for terrorists to get their hands on this type of material is to steal it."

The work began this month at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. Radiation safety officer Jean St. Germain says the center's machine is kept in its blood bank. It is used to irradiate blood for patients with weak immune systems.

"It's not as if we can stop using this device," St. Germain says.

New York Police Department counterterrorism chief Richard Falkenrath called the retrofits "very basic and relatively cheap" and said they are "long overdue."