



Guidance Note on Biological Agents relevant to Service Support Staff

A biological agent (BA) means a micro organism, including those which have been genetically modified, a cell culture or a human endoparasite, which may be able to provoke any infection, allergy or toxicity. They are classified into four risk groups according to their level of risk of infection.

Heads of Units, Principal Investigators, and others responsible for managing areas where BAs are used/stored/disposed/etc., must assess the health and safety risks to those University Service Support staff who are expected to conduct work in specified areas where BAs are, or may be, present. Service Support staff includes maintenance, cleaning, house-keeping, security and stewarding staff from the Buildings Office, local workshop technical support staff, and ISS staff. Outside contractors, visitors and others (such as Emergency Services personnel, and undergraduate students who may enter these areas to meet with teaching staff) should also be taken into account.

It is understandable that some Service Support staff may be concerned where they see biohazard warning signs necessarily in place at the entrance to, or in, laboratories or other rooms and areas where they are expected to conduct their work. Such concerns can often be allayed by offering full information and clear procedures ensuring that risks are controlled and health and safety is assured.

When determining the methods for reducing risks to such persons, due consideration must be given to all classes (risk groups) of BA, and actions must be taken to ensure that the higher risk BAs are given priority. Risk control measures include the following:

- A specific (dated and signed) declaration that the instrument/equipment/computer /service (electrical, plumbing, gas service/supply) etc, or working areas to be maintained/cleaned/inspected, etc, are either free from biohazards or that risks from such hazards are sufficiently and safely controlled.
- A clear definition of who may authorise such service support work to be conducted in the area or on the equipment in question.
- Clear identification of the task, location, and methods to be used by the service support staff, in other words: what's to be done? where is it? and, how will it be done?
- Clear identification and enforcement of the precautions to be taken to reduce risks from BAs, including 'NO GO' areas, 'DO NOT TOUCH' instructions, and any personal protective equipment requirements, such as protective gloves, etc, that need to be worn when in certain areas or touching certain devices.
- Clear procedures of what to do in an emergency e.g. accidents, first aid, evacuation.
- Clear signage and labelling of areas, equipment, and instruments where BAs are present. A recent report issued by the Environmental Protection Agency as part of their legal enforcement duties in NUI Galway highlighted the necessity for '...biohazard signs (to) be put up in all areas where (biological agents) are being used/stored etc...'

Please convey the measures you have taken to the relevant Support Services personnel and to relevant Unit personnel who use or who are exposed to BAs. If a new risk assessment for this issue has been generated, please ensure that it is included in your unit's safety statement.