

Research on deadly flu virus prompts US government censorship

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Scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Erasmus Medical Center in the Netherlands are set to publish experiments revealing mutations that can confer airborne transmission to the deadly H5N1 “bird flu” virus. In response to the new research, and in the name of preventing “terrorism,” members of the political and media establishment have called for the studies to be censored, and the scientific journals to which the articles were submitted have agreed to implement redactions.

While the studies themselves have yet to be published, research presented at public meetings is available and was summarized by the *New York Times*: “The experiment involved creating mutations in the virus and then squirting it into the respiratory tracts of ferrets. When the ferrets got sick, the researchers would collect their nasal secretions and expose other ferrets to the virus. After repetitions of this process, a strain of virus emerged from sick ferrets last summer that could infect animals in nearby cages without being squirted into them—just by traveling through the air.”

Ferrets are considered an excellent model organism for studies of human influenza transmission. While H5N1 normally can be transmitted only through direct physical contact with secretions such as mucous, the mutations acquired through multiple rounds of infection conferred upon the virus the ability to be spread through the air, potentially through a sneeze or a

cough. In these experiments, only a handful of mutations were necessary to confer these new and deadly abilities to the bird flu.

That such a process of repeated infection and mutation routinely occurs during disease outbreaks indicates the dangerous potential for H5N1 transmitted in the human population to acquire these mutations. If a virus in the course of replication and transmission were to spontaneously acquire the mutations necessary for airborne transmission, a world-wide pandemic of unprecedented lethality could be the result.

The H5N1 strain of influenza has a particularly high rate of mortality among those infected. It has been confirmed to have infected nearly 600 people since it was discovered in 1997, with more than half of those infected dying from the disease. For comparison, the deadly 1918 Spanish flu pandemic killed only about two percent of those infected.

Alarmingly, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization this September issued a bulletin warning of “a major resurgence of the H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza amid signs that a mutant strain of the deadly bird flu virus is spreading in Asia and beyond, with unpredictable risks to human health.”

The urgency of this warning makes continued and expanded research of these newly discovered mutations all the more imperative. However, the Obama administration and the media establishment have responded with hysteria, calling for the censoring of the research on the grounds of potential “terrorism.” Rather than underscoring the dangers of a potential pandemic revealed by these studies and calling for tenfold effort

and new resources made available for this and other bird flu research, *Science* and *Nature* (the scientific journals which are to publish the studies) have agreed to enforce government censorship.

In the case of scientific research, censorship is being carried out through the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity. This board was established in 2004 and advises scientific journals such as *Science* and *Nature* on publishing “dual-use” papers whose contents are deemed potentially dangerous to national security. Both journals have agreed to accede to the authority of this board.

The idea that the availability of the methods and results of these studies would allow the development of a bioweapon by terrorists is preposterous. These studies were the result of years of effort by scores of scientists spending millions of dollars at major public research institutions. The facilities in which this type of viral research is conducted are specially designed, sealed environments where air is filtered and kept at negative pressure to avoid accidental release of deadly pathogens. These facilities even have their own dedicated power and air sources to prevent accidents in the event of a failure of the power grid. Scientists who work in these facilities wear containment suits akin to spacesuits and must shower and change their clothes before leaving the lab.

That a group of terrorists could acquire the facilities, equipment, animals, reagents (including the H5N1 virus), and team of highly trained scientists necessary to create this mutated virus is a clear deceit. A far more likely terrorism scenario is one similar to the 2001 anthrax attacks, in which a scientist at the government’s biodefense labs at Fort Detrick in Maryland apparently sent letters containing spores of the deadly Ames strain of the anthrax bacterium to the offices of members of the media and politicians. Twenty-two people were infected by the anthrax from these letters, of which five infections were fatal.

Fort Detrick was the site of one of the US Army Biological Warfare Laboratories set up under the Roosevelt administration in 1943. From 1943 to 1969, the US government committed hundreds of millions of

dollars toward weaponization of plant, animal, and human diseases. Although all offensive research on bioweapons was officially ended by the Nixon administration in 1969, the Clinton and second Bush administrations both conducted research considered by some to be in violation of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, including research on anthrax, as revealed by the *New York Times* just fourteen days before the anthrax attacks in 2001.

Suppression of research is just the latest front in the attack on democratic rights in the US and internationally. That the editors of *Science* and *Nature* have agreed, after bullying by the government and the media, to collaborate in the censorship of critical scientific research demonstrates the degree to which large impact journals have become beholden to the influence of Washington and other outside parties.



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