

Bird flu scientists respond to media hysteria, suspend critical research

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The principal investigators of the American and Dutch research groups that recently discovered mutations that can confer airborne transmission to the deadly H5N1 “bird flu” have released a letter rebutting the hysteria created by the media over the virus’s potential escape, but agreeing to temporarily halt their research.

In late 2011, researchers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and the Erasmus Medical Center in the Netherlands both sought to publish research demonstrating that a handful of mutations, accumulating in the course of transmission, can result in a form of bird flu that is transmissible through the air by a sneeze or cough rather than as, at present, through close or intimate contact.

This breakthrough research and its alarming results were obtained using ferrets, the model organism commonly used to study human influenza transmission, and provides valuable insight into mutations that may develop in the human virus in the course of its spreading.

Despite warnings in September 2011 from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization of “signs that a mutant strain of the deadly bird flu virus is spreading in Asia and beyond,” the response of the American media and political establishment to the revelations in this explosive bird flu research was hysteria over “bioterrorism.” Calls were made in the media, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, for the journals *Science* and *Nature* to censor the studies before publication.

Using the authority of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB, created in 2004), the Obama administration worked with the two journals to redact portions of the studies prior to their being publishing. As a result, the articles as published lack

the information necessary for other scientists to repeat or continue this important work.

In response, the heads of the two labs have published a letter in the 20 January 2012 edition of *Scienceexpress* online, replying to the hysteria stoked by the media, and volunteering to suspend their research for 60 days in order to “clearly explain the benefits of this important research and the measures taken to minimize its possible risks.”

The scientists note in their letter that “[t]he continuous threat of an influenza pandemic represents one of the biggest challenges in public health,” and that “[a] major obstacle in preventing influenza pandemics is that little is known regarding what makes an influenza virus transmissible in humans.” The authors then defend their research by stating that the discovery of these mutations provides “critical information that advances our understanding of influenza transmission.”

While the authors only seek to address the risk of the virus’s potential accidental release by asserting that “these experiments have been conducted with appropriate regulatory oversight in secure containment facilities by highly trained and responsible personnel to minimize any risk of accidental release,” the *New York Times*, in reporting on the letter, wasted no time in reminding their readers of the media’s hysterical narrative that the virus could be “stolen by terrorists,” and Reuters reminds its readers that the research could “be used to create a devastating form of bioterrorism.”

Rather than focusing on how this research is essential for preventing a flu pandemic, as the scientists themselves point out in their letter, the *Times* paints the research itself as “putting the world at risk of a potentially catastrophic pandemic.” In the face of an intense attack campaign, and knowing the importance for public health of continuing their work, the scientists

have decided to temporarily suspend their research in order to combat the anti-scientific propaganda of the media by waging their own campaign “in an international forum in which the scientific community comes together to discuss and debate these issues.”

The despicable conduct of the American media and political establishment has caused undue restriction and delay of research critical for public health. Far more concerned about a deadly bioweapon being developed by their rivals than about the well-being of the world’s population, American imperialism and their cheerleaders in the press have hindered scientific progress, playing politics with the lives of billions, and setting a deplorable precedent of scientific censorship.

The author also recommends:

Research on deadly flu virus prompts US government censorship

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