

WHO may open its private bird flu database

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The World Health Organization is reportedly being pressured to expand access to its private bird flu database as a way to spur wider research on the virus.

As WHO officials consider that request, the Geneva-based WHO announced it will ask its 192 member states to adopt a resolution in May that includes a pledge to share virus data. It isn't yet clear if the resolution will seek to make the data publicly accessible, The Wall Street Journal reported Tuesday.

The avian flu virus has killed approximately 100 people worldwide since it re-emerged in late 2003. But scientists fear the virus might mutate and become easily transmittable between people, creating a pandemic and taking millions of lives.

Public health officials say information, if shared freely, might lead to the design of a vaccine.

In a recent editorial, the science journal Nature pointed to "an old-boy network of researchers" with access to WHO's password-protected database as part of the problem.

The New York Times also editorially criticized the WHO for its "secret database."

"The limited-access archive should be opened or bypassed immediately to encourage research on this looming health menace," The Times said.

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