

# CERN physics lab downplays claim of key discovery

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The March 30, 2010 file photo shows a scientist of the European Organization for Nuclear Research, CERN, gesturing in the Alice experiment control room at their headquarters outside Geneva, Switzerland. Officials at the world's biggest particle physics lab are playing down claims of a major discovery after a leaked internal memo sparked excitement among science enthusiasts that the elusive Higgs-boson 'God particle' has been found. A spokesman for the European Organization for Nuclear Research, or CERN, said the observation by scientists working at the US\$10-billion Large Hadron Collider "is probably nothing." (AP Photo/Anja Niedringhaus)

(AP) -- The world's biggest particle physics lab on Tuesday played down claims of a major discovery, after a leaked memo hinting that the elusive Higgs boson - or 'God particle' - may have been found ricocheted around science websites.

A spokesman for [CERN](http://cern.ch), the European Organization for Nuclear

Research, said the memo wasn't intended for publication and the claims likely wouldn't withstand closer scrutiny. If proven to exist, the [Higgs particle](#) could explain why matter has mass, an enormous [scientific breakthrough](#).

See: [Another Higgs rumor reminds us how science is correctly done](#)

"The note is certainly genuine," spokesman James Gillies told The Associated Press on Tuesday. But he said such memos are merely the very first step in a rigorous peer-review process that tends to result in spectacular claims being knocked down by other scientists.

"I think the excitement is due mainly to the incredible sense of anticipation there is in particle physics at the moment," said Gillies.

Thousands of researchers around the world are poring over data generated at CERN's \$10-billion [Large Hadron Collider](#) near Geneva, and many expect it to produce significant discoveries about the makeup of matter and other mysteries of the universe in the years to come.

"The Higgs really is the Holy Grail of [particle physics](#) and that's why this is so important," said Phillip F. Schewe, a spokesman for the American Institute of Physics.

Previously, much of the initial debate would have taken place behind closed doors. But the buzz surrounding the Large Hadron Collider and the development of social media networks means even early-stage science is leaking out and quickly spreading worldwide.

"It's unusual for this sort of specific, detailed material to be made public," said Peter Woit, a physicist at Columbia University on whose blog the memo first appeared last week.

Woit said he chose not to suppress the posting, as it had already generated dozens of comments by the time he saw it - many of them skeptical. "This was accurate information of interest to my blog readers," he said.

The note was posted anonymously, but carried the names of four researchers working at CERN's Atlas experiment. Atlas is one of four giant detectors built to record high-energy proton collisions inside the collider's 17-mile (27-kilometer) tunnel beneath the Swiss-French border. The memo claims that abnormal measurements seen at a particular energy level are "the first definitive observation of physics beyond the standard model."

The authors of the note either declined or didn't respond to AP requests for comment. But Jon Butterworth, a physicist at University College London who also works with Atlas, said it was unfortunate the memo had been published.

"It's quite an overstated communication," he said, adding that about 30 such notes are circulated among Atlas scientists each week. Few make it into peer-reviewed journals.

Schewe compared the leaking of the memo to WikiLeaks' publication of U.S. foreign policy documents. "It's embarrassing, but probably in the long run not so bad," he said.

**More information:** Peter Woit's weblog: <http://bit.ly/fimOqz>

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