

Go-ahead for bird flu study publication after security check (Update)

February 17 2012

Bird flu experts meeting in Geneva on Friday ruled that controversial research on a mutant form of the virus potentially capable of being spread among humans should be made public.

Security assessments must however be carried out first before the two studies can be published and the research can continue, scientists agreed at a two-day meeting at the World Health Organization.

"The consensus was that in the interest of public health the full papers should be published," said Professor Ron Fouchier from the Institute of Virology in the Netherlands, the scientist behind one of the studies.

US bio-security chiefs urged in November that key details of the papers remain unpublished, citing fears of a pandemic should a mutated H5N1 virus escape the laboratory.

Scientists agreed on January 20 to a 60-day moratorium on further studies.

That deadline will now be extended for an unspecified time to allow for a wider group of scientists to examine the risks and allow for public discussion, Fouchier said at a conference following the meeting.

"This is very important research that needs to move forward," he said.

"The question is, how can it be done safely, what about bio-security, how

do we prevent access to bad people?"

"Once there's agreement on all those issues then we can continue our work."

The 22 participants included the two teams of researchers and representatives of the scientific journals Science and Nature who were asked to withhold publication.

The editor of the US journal Science said later Friday he supports the decision of the bird flu experts in Geneva.

"The supreme court of decision-making on these things should not be me," said Bruce Alberts, editor-in-chief of Science, which along with the British journal Nature had been on track to publish partial versions of the research in March.

Alberts said the two journals were working closely with each other and with authorities, and would await further information before making plans to publish the manuscripts in full in the months ahead.

"Many people in the government worked very hard to try to see whether they could develop a mechanism that could be used to selectively get redacted information to the right people, and they came across all kinds of difficulties."

The engineered virus, created by two separate research teams in the Netherlands and Wisconsin, was able to spread through the air among mammals, indicating it could potentially be deadly to humans on a massive scale.

Alberts said he hoped that the decision taken after the two-day Geneva meeting would lead to the creation of an international body of scientists

and biosecurity experts for making future decisions on such matters.

"The very best possible outcome for this is the establishment of an international version of the NSABB," he said, referring to the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, a US advisory panel that urged the government, which had funded the research, to withhold key details from publication.

However, NSABB leaders said last year that an international decision was needed and that they would obey any decision agreed by the global science community.

Avian influenza H5N1 is primarily transmitted between birds and very rarely to humans.

The Dutch team and another from the University of Wisconsin in the United States found ways late last year to engineer the virus so that it could be transmitted among mammals.

The breakthrough raised alarm that the method could fall into the wrong hands and unleash a massive flu pandemic that could cost millions of lives.

The WHO said 345 people have died from H5N1 from a total of 584 cases in 15 countries. The majority of victims have been in Indonesia.

"Given the high death rate associated with this virus all participants at the meeting emphasised the high level of concern with this flu virus in the scientific community and the need to understand it better with additional research," said Dr Keiji Fukuda, WHO assistant director general of health security.

The body underlined the need to increase public understanding of the

research and to review bio-security issues.

The WHO will host further meetings "soon" with a wider range of scientists.

"This was a group of experts on influenza research," said Fouchier.

"We need to consult with the broader scientific community."

(c) 2012 AFP

Citation: Go-ahead for bird flu study publication after security check (Update) (2012, February 17) retrieved 2 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-02-go-ahead-bird-flu.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.