

# Panel backs sharing studies of lab-made bird flu

March 30 2012, By MALCOLM RITTER , AP Science Writer

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(AP) -- The U.S. government's biosecurity advisers said Friday they support publishing research studies showing how scientists made new easy-to-spread forms of bird flu because the studies, now revised, don't reveal details bioterrorists could use.

The decision could end a debate that began in December when the government took the unprecedented step of asking the scientists not to publicize all the details of their work.

The research, by two scientific teams - one in Wisconsin, the other in The Netherlands - was funded by the U.S. It was an effort to learn more about the potential threat from [bird flu](#) in Asia. The virus so far doesn't spread easily among people. But the new lab-made viruses spread easily among [ferrets](#), suggesting they would also spread among humans.

Last year, after reviewing earlier versions of the papers, the National Science Advisory Board for [Biosecurity](#) said publishing full details would be too risky. The federal government agreed.

Scientists around the world debated the matter. Many argued that full publication would help scientists track dangerous [mutations](#) in natural bird [flu viruses](#), and test vaccines and treatments.

On Friday, board members, meeting in Washington, announced they are satisfied with the revised papers. It was not clear what changes were made. The panel's advice now goes to the U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services for a decision.

The board unanimously supported publication of one study, led by Yoshihiro Kawaoka of the University of Wisconsin. By majority vote it supported publication of the key parts of a second study, from Ron Fouchier of the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

Editors of the journals Science and Nature, which plan to publish the works, said they were pleased by the recommendation. "Subject to any outstanding regulatory and legal issues, we intend to proceed with publication as soon as possible," said Philip Campbell, editor-in-chief of Nature.

The man-made viruses are locked in high-security labs. Publication in scientific journals is how scientists share their work so that their colleagues can build on it, perhaps finding ways to better monitor and thwart bird [flu](#) in the wild, for example.

University of Pennsylvania bioethics professor Art Caplan said the board's recommendation makes sense, primarily because the information in the studies is already being shared among scientists.

"The details of this paper are already out, these two papers. The horse is out of the barn and trying to yank it back doesn't make much sense," Caplan said.

Natural bird flu has infected people through close contact with animals, and it doesn't easily spread from person to person. Scientists fear that a highly transmissible bird flu could cause a lethal pandemic.

The researchers say the transmissible germs they created did not actually kill the lab animals.

The bird flu virus, called H5N1, has spread mostly through poultry in Asia for the past decade. It has killed more than 300 people since 2003, mostly in Asia.

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