

# Heightened biosecurity threat is often exaggerated

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The link between synthetic biology and heightened biosecurity threats is often exaggerated. In a report published today (22nd May) by King's College London, researchers say that in order to produce more refined assessments of the biosecurity threat, we need to understand more clearly what would be achieved by synthetic biology's goal to 'make biology easier to engineer', and to recognise the complex skills and equipment that would still be required to 'engineer' biology.

Synthetic Biology and Biosecurity: How scared should we be? reports the results from a workshop organised by Dr Catherine Jefferson, Dr Filippa Lentzos and Dr Claire Marris, at King's in February 2014.

Synthetic biology's aim to make biology easier to engineer has raised concerns that it could increase the risk of misuse for biowarfare or

bioterrorism. The workshop brought together [synthetic biologists](#), [social scientists](#), [policy experts](#) and [science journalists](#) to explore whether concerns about these risks are realistic or exaggerated in the light of current scientific realities.

Dr Claire Marris, one of the report authors, said: 'It is often assumed that [synthetic biology](#) will 'de-skill' biology and that this means that any layperson working outside professional scientific institutions is, or soon will be, able to design and engineer living organisms at will. However, workshop participants argued that this representation is too simplistic. As we see in other industries such as aeronautics, de-skilling does not necessarily mean that specialised expertise becomes irrelevant.'

The 'Synthetic Biology and Biosecurity' workshop and report formed part of King's on-going work on the social dimensions of synthetic biology, conducted within the EPSRC funded Centre for Synthetic Biology and Innovation and the Flowers Consortium and an ESRC funded project on the politics of bioterrorism.

**More information:** The report is available online:  
[www.kcl.ac.uk/newsevents/news/ ... -and-Biosecurity.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/newsevents/news/...-and-Biosecurity.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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