Calls to censor details of potential killer flu

By Alison Caldwell

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The suppression of break-through research into deadly bird flu strains has been labelled scientific censorship by some, but others say it is a necessary step to prevent a possible biological attack.

Photo: The H5N1 strain of bird flu is fatal in 60 per cent of human cases
(Pornchai Kittiwongsakul: AFP)
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Last month researchers in the Netherlands discovered that the H5N1 influenza virus, or bird flu, could develop into a dangerous virus that can spread between humans.

The H5N1 strain of bird flu is fatal in 60 per cent of human cases but only 350 people have so far died from the disease largely because it cannot be spread by sneezing or coughing.

But by using ferrets in a lab, the researchers proved it was possible to change H5N1 into an aerosol-transmissible virus that can be easily spread rapidly through the air.

The genetic mutations could trigger deadly epidemics in humans, and the scientists behind the research have now agreed to remove key details of their work from publication.

The research - known as the Erasmus study - alarmed the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB), a US government science committee.

It argued the information could be used by terrorists to orchestrate a biological attack using the virus.

The virologists were planning to publish their research in the respected journals Science and Nature.

But they have now agreed to redact their manuscripts at the request of the NSABB.

Dr Philip Cambell, Nature's editor-in-chief, describes the NSABB's recommendations as unprecedented.

Audio: Mixed response to suppression of flu research (PM)

"It is essential for public health that the full details of any scientific analysis of flu viruses be available to researchers," he said in a statement.

He says authorities are trying to work out how appropriate access to the scientific methods and data can be granted within the scenario recommended by the NSABB.

Censorship

But there are concerns now that science is being censored.

Professor Wendy Barclay, the chair of Influenza Virology at Imperial College in London, says the Erasmus study should be reviewed and shared.

"It's a very worrying idea that the information may be restricted to those that qualify in some way to be allowed to share it," she said in a statement.

"Who will qualify? How will this be decided? In the end, is the likelihood of misuse outweighed by the danger of beginning a big brother society?

"I'm not convinced that withholding scientific know-how will prevent the highly unlikely scenario of misuse of information, but I am worried that it may stunt our progress towards the improved control of this infectious disease."

'Major mistake'

Peter Collignon, a Professor of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology at the Australian National University, says the study should not have been conducted in the first place.

"Yes this is censorship, but by allowing this material to be out in the general public I think you're putting public health at higher risk rather than lower risk," he said.

What is even more a major mistake was that this research was allowed to go ahead in the first place.

Peter Collignon, professor of Infectious Diseases and Microbiology at ANU

"If you've actually taken a virus like the influenza virus... if you genetically engineer that and engineer mutations that then make it readily

transmissible from... potentially from person to person, that is a huge problem given that the millions of people who've died in 1918 as a result of the Spanish flu.

"So to allow that material to be published that may be used by somebody with less than honourable intents, to use it to engineer something, I think is a major mistake.

"But what is even more a major mistake was that this research was allowed to go ahead in the first place."

Scary

He says there should be an international convention on the use of aggressive viruses.

"I think if you're taking a virus we have now and making it even more aggressive or more lethal and more easily spread, I do think you need an international convention or group of countries that regulate that so that just one country can't use it against the others," he said.

I can't think of another pathogenic organism that is as scary as this one.

NSABB chair Paul Keim

"And to me you really have to justify doing it and have to do this in the utmost secure facilities."

The Erasmus study was commissioned by the American National Institutes of Health.

The Dutch research team was led by Ron Fouchier at Rotterdam's Erasmus Medical Centre. The researchers received a permit to conduct the study from the Dutch government.

NSABB chair Paul Keim, a microbial geneticist, told Science magazine's Science Insider report last month that he had huge concerns about the potential havoc the man-made virus could unleash.

"I can't think of another pathogenic organism that is as scary as this one," Mr Keim said.

"I don't think anthrax is scary at all compared to this."

Topics: diseases-and-disorders, science-and-technology, avian-influenza, influenza, united-states, netherlands

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