

WHO: Bird flu research raises safety questions

December 30 2011, By FRANK JORDANS , Associated Press

(AP) -- The World Health Organization is warning that dangerous scientific information could fall into the wrong hands after U.S. government-funded researchers engineered a form of the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus more easily transmissible between humans.

In a strongly worded statement Friday, WHO said it was "deeply concerned about the potential [negative consequences](#)" if the results of the study were used to create [biological weapons](#) or the mutated virus was accidentally released.

"This is not the kind of research that you would want to have out there," WHO's top influenza expert, Dr. Keiji Fukuda, told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

At the same time, WHO was concerned that all credible researchers should be able to access the study to better understand how to prevent a deadly H5N1 pandemic, Fukuda said.

H5N1 rarely infects humans and usually only those who come into close contact with poultry. But among those infected, up to 60 percent die, and scientists are closely watching the virus for any signs it is becoming more easily transmissible from human to human.

The U.S. National Institutes of Health last week asked scientists at Erasmus University Medical Center in the Netherlands and the University of Wisconsin-Madison to refrain from publishing full details

of their work on how to make the [H5N1 virus](#) more easily transmissible between humans.

The unprecedented step by NIH prompted concern in the scientific community that researchers with a legitimate need to know about these dangerous mutations, particularly in Asia, would be prevented from accessing the data.

Fukuda said there was a danger that perceived censorship of scientific results could harm the so-called Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Framework, an international agreement painstakingly hammered out only recently by the global body's 194 member states.

"We don't want the concerns or controversies surrounding this H5N1 research to pose a risk to the implementation of that framework because we see it as a very important public health step," Fukuda told The Associated Press.

"But at the same time we recognize that the research raises questions about what are appropriate safeguards, what kind of procedures should be in place, what are the right mechanisms for reducing any risk," he said.

Fukuda said WHO itself had had not obtained the results of the two groups' research yet, and might not even ask for it.

"I'm hoping that we are privy to as much of the details as possible, but like anybody else one of the questions for us is what kind of information do we need to know," he said.

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