

U.S. gives green light to publish controversial bird flu research

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Electron micrograph of bird flu. Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

After expert panel review, officials say H5N1 findings are of benefit, with little risk to national security.

(HealthDay) -- The U.S. government is giving the go-ahead for publication of two controversial studies into the H5N1 avian (bird) flu virus, a top federal health official announced Friday.

The research, led by two scientists -- Yoshihiro Kawaoka of the University of Wisconsin and Ron Fouchier of Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands -- involved the manipulation of the potentially [lethal virus](#) until it was transmissible between ferrets, thought to be a close model for humans. As yet, [H5N1](#) is not easily transmitted between humans.

In December, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) requested that two leading journals, *Science* and *Nature*, censor some of the data from this research for national security reasons. The concern was that terrorists might use the information to create a biological weapon.

However, on Friday, Dr. Francis Collins, director of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, announced in a statement that full publication could go forward. The decision was based on a March 29-30 meeting of the National Science Advisory Board for [Biosecurity](#) (NSABB), an independent panel of experts that advises the federal government on such matters.

According to Collins, "After careful deliberation, the NSABB unanimously recommended the revised manuscript by Dr. Yoshihiro Kawaoka be communicated in full. The NSABB also recommended, in a 12-to-6 decision, that the data, methods, and conclusions presented in the revised manuscript by Dr. Ron Fouchier be communicated fully after a number of further scientific clarifications are made in the manuscript."

Collins added that the research has "direct applicability to ongoing and future [influenza surveillance](#) efforts and does not appear to enable direct misuse of the research in ways that would endanger public health or national security."

He said that HHS Secretary [Kathleen Sebelius](#) agreed with the decision. "The information in the two manuscripts should be communicated fully and we have conveyed our concurrence to the journals considering publication of the manuscripts," Collins said.

Kathy Wren, a spokeswoman for *Science*, which is withholding the Fouchier study, said the journal is still waiting for a decision by Dutch regulators next week before deciding when it will publish the research,

Bloomberg News reported.

More information: Find out more about H5N1 avian influenza at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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