

Scientists to resume work with lab-bred bird flu

January 23 2013, by Lauran Neergaard



Staff wearing protective clothing cull chickens in a Hong Kong market after the deadly H5N1 bird flu virus was found in samples collected from the market's poultry stalls, on June 7, 2008. Scientists who created a mutant bird flu virus said Wednesday they will resume the controversial research after taking a 12-month break to allay fears of the bug escaping the lab or falling into terrorist hands.

International scientists who last year halted controversial research with the deadly bird flu say they are resuming their work as countries adopt new rules to ensure safety.

The outcry erupted when two labs—in the Netherlands and the U.S.—reported they had created easier-to-spread versions of [bird flu](#). Amid fierce debate about the oversight of such research and whether it might aid terrorists, those scientists voluntarily halted further work last January—and more than three dozen of the world's leading flu researchers signed on as well.

On Wednesday, those scientists announced they were ending their [moratorium](#) because their pause in study worked: It gave the U.S. government and other world health authorities time to determine how they would oversee high-stakes research involving dangerous germs.

A number of countries already have issued new rules. The U.S. is finalizing its own research guidelines, a process that Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health said should be completed within several weeks.

In letters published in the journals *Science* and *Nature* this week, scientists wrote that those who meet their country's requirements have a responsibility to resume studying how the deadly bird flu might mutate to become a bigger threat to people—maybe even the next [pandemic](#). So far, the so-called H5N1 virus mostly spreads among poultry and other birds and rarely infects people.

"The risk exists in nature already. Not doing the research is really putting us in danger," said Yoshihiro Kawaoka of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He and Ron Fouchier of Erasmus University in the Netherlands separately created the new [virus strains](#) that could spread through the air.

The controversy flared just over a year ago, when U.S. officials, prompted by the concerns of a biosecurity [advisory panel](#), asked the two labs not to publish the results. They worried that terrorists might use the

information to create a bioweapon. More broadly, scientists debated whether creating new strains of disease is a good idea, and if so, how to safeguard against laboratory accidents.

Ultimately, the flu researchers prevailed: The government decided the data didn't pose any immediate terrorism threat after all, and the two labs' work was published last summer.

Fouchier said that within weeks, he will begin new research in the Netherlands, with European funding, to explore exactly which mutations are the biggest threat. He said the work could enable scientists today to be on the lookout as bird flu continually evolves in the wild.

U.S.-funded scientists cannot resume their studies until the government's policy is finalized.

But the NIH had paid for the original research—and it would have been approved under the soon-to-come expanded policy as well, Fauci told The Associated Press. That policy will add an extra layer of review to higher-risk research, to ensure that it is scientifically worth doing and that safety and bioterrorism concerns are fully addressed up-front, he said.

Had that policy been in place over a year ago, it could have averted the bird [flu](#) debate, Fauci said: "Our answer simply would have been, yes, we vetted it very carefully and the benefit is worth any risk. Period, case closed."

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