

U.S. lifts ban on laboratory-made lethal viruses

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(HealthDay)—U.S. officials said on Tuesday they've lifted a moratorium

enacted three years ago on funding lab experiments that would create lethal viruses.

This type of research can now occur if a scientific panel finds the potential benefits outweigh any risks, said Dr. Francis Collins, head of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

The research in question would involve tweaking viruses to make them more lethal.

Proponents of this type of science say it could give answers to urgent questions, such as how bird flu might mutate to infect humans more easily, or insights into vaccine development.

But opponents worry that scientists might inadvertently create a highly lethal germ that could escape the lab and infect humans worldwide.

Speaking to *The New York Times*, Collins said the new policy seeks to further science—but only when it's justified, and only in a high-security lab.

"We see this as a rigorous policy, we want to be sure we're doing this right," he said.

The new rules require that researchers show their studies are sound, and that any germ that might be modified in the lab would bring about knowledge that would benefit people—advances such as a vaccine, for example.

Scientists must also prove that there is no safer means of achieving that scientific end.

In October 2014, federal funding was stopped for lab research that

would have altered three viruses to make them more lethal: the influenza [virus](#); the virus behind Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and the virus behind severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).

The new regulations would allow such work, as well as other research, Collins said. According to the *Times*, that could theoretically include any request to create an Ebola virus that might be transmittable through the air.

Collins said the 2014 moratorium has halted 21 research projects, although 10 were later continued after being given exceptions to the rule.

Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist and bioweapons expert at Rutgers University in New Jersey, has long been a critic of this type of research. He told the *Times* that while he supports the use of review panels in greenlighting this research, he would prefer they be independent panels, not governmental boards.

Marc Lipsitch, who directs the Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics at the Harvard School of Public Health, was similarly cautious.

He said the implementation of the review process was "a small step forward." But he told the *Times* that lab work that has enhanced germs, "have given us some modest scientific knowledge and done almost nothing to improve our preparedness for pandemics, and yet risked creating an accidental pandemic."

More information: Find out more about pandemic viruses at the [World Health Organization](#).

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