EDITORIAL

The Latest on the Doomsday Virus

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We can worry less that a newly created bird flu virus might kill tens or hundreds of millions of people if it escaped from the laboratory. But there is still some residual danger. And we remain appalled at the slipshod way in which this research was authorized despite its potential dangers to public health and national security.

The tale is a complicated one, but worth understanding since this is not the last time that this country and the world will face serious questions about scientific research and biosecurity. And government officials must ensure that, going forward, the process of approving such experiments works a lot more rationally.

The most worrying experiments were carried out by Dutch scientists and financed by this country’s National Institutes of Health. The researchers started with the bird flu virus, which seldom infects humans but is highly lethal when it does. With five mutations they made it transmissible through the air among ferrets and possibly humans.

Based on statements by the lead scientist that the virus retained its lethality, we urged in January that it be destroyed or studied only in a few high-containment laboratories, and that nothing be published about the experiments or, at a minimum, that details that might help a terrorist be redacted. In March, after the lead scientist, in a turnabout, said his new virus did not actually spread all that easily and was not lethal to ferrets when it did so, we called for clarification by an independent arbiter, like the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity. That is the group of nongovernmental experts that originally voted 22 to 0 to recommend publication only after details on specific mutations and how they were made were redacted.

Now that board has changed its mind. In late March, after reviewing a revised version of the paper and grilling the Dutch scientist, it voted 12 to 6 to recommend publication with none of the details excised.

Board members told us that the new virus appeared less lethal than they first thought; the benefits of letting scientists around the world keep an eye out for the specific mutations in nature appeared greater than they first thought; and the risk that a terrorist would use the information seemed minimal, judging from a briefing they got from intelligence officials. Many members also felt boxed in when federal officials said that redacting the details...
would harm America’s relations with nations that wanted full access.

The board’s new verdict is not wholly reassuring. The members had little time to digest a revised version of the Dutch paper and other new data, and they heard what the board’s leading influenza expert, Michael Osterholm, described in a letter to the National Institutes of Health and board members as a very “one-sided” presentation that was “designed” to push the board to reverse itself without hearing from independent experts with contrary views.

Even if the new virus is not highly lethal, board members say that might change should the virus escape confinement and recombine with other viruses to become both highly lethal and easily transmissible.

Federal officials say they know they must do better in the future. They recently issued a new policy that will require all federally financed experiments with bird flu and other worrisome pathogens to be evaluated for risks and benefits before they start. In this case, the danger of accidental release was weighed beforehand by Dutch review boards, and the laboratory was inspected by American experts. But the threat of a terrorist’s using the information to cause a pandemic was not formally assessed by anyone until after the experiments were done and papers had been submitted for publication.

The new policy will need to be monitored closely and buttressed with more detailed guidance to scientists and review groups on how to weigh the risks and benefits of experiments that might cause the greatest damage. Federal officials will also need to persuade other countries to conduct similar evaluations. The health of millions should not be left to luck.