Scientists call for a longer ban on bird flu research

Work on making H5N1 strain transmissible should not resume until it is safe, says US agency

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Thursday, 2 August 2012

Flu researchers have come under intense pressure from senior officials within the US Government to continue their voluntary moratorium on research into the deadly H5N1 strain of bird flu virus.

Tony Fauci, the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told a meeting of flu researchers in New York that the wider public is not ready for scientists to restart their controversial work involving the creation of "airborne" strains of H5N1 that could pass easily from one person to another.

When details emerged last December of two experiments where scientists deliberately mutated H5N1 to make it highly transmissible, flu researchers decided to suspend the work temporarily following widespread public concern.

But instead of the moratorium lasting 60 days, it has lasted more than six months, leading some flu scientists to call for the suspension of the voluntary ban so the work can restart.

However, Dr Fauci, who has previously said that he would like the moratorium to be lifted as soon as possible, told the meeting that restarting the research would be premature.
"The flu scientific community can no longer be the only player in the discussion about this research. You will unquestionably lose the battle for public support for your research if you ignore this issue," Dr Fauci said.

"I strongly recommend that you continue the voluntary moratorium until we can have this open and transparent process," he said. Dr Fauci is a leading figure within the US National Institutes of Health, which funded both sets of experiments.

Ron Fouchier, of Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, who deliberately mutated the H5N1 virus to make it airborne transmissible between laboratory ferrets, said that the time has come for the moratorium to be lifted.

But the view is not shared by many non-flu scientists contacted last week by The Independent. They included veteran biologists involved in the 1975 Asilomar conference in California where a moratorium on genetic engineering was agreed until ethical guidelines were put in place.

"There should be a serious review and evaluation of the concerns that led to the moratorium and a scientifically rigorous analysis of why the concerns can be managed before the moratorium could be lifted," Professor Paul Berg, of Stanford University, said.