

SCIENCE WINS OUT: BIRD FLU VIRUS EXPERIMENTS WILL BE PUBLISHED WITHOUT REDACTIONS DESPITE CONTINUED US FEAR MONGERING

Back in December, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) asked that two papers pending publication on scientific research into deadly forms of the H5N1 bird flu virus be redacted when published. This was a bad decision for several reasons, as I pointed out:

At this point, if the details of just which precise mutations occur in the pathogenic virus that was developed are published, it should make no difference, because press reports have already confirmed that the most basic approach one could take, involving a simple genetic selection experiment, gives the result of the more pathogenic virus. It's even likely there are other combinations of mutations that would make an extremely pathogenic virus if the selection process were repeated in a new experiment.

But the folly of the NSABB decision goes much deeper and is just another aspect of the hysteria that has gripped the United States since the al Qaeda attack on 9/11 and the anthrax attack just a few weeks later. One aspect of this hysteria has been an attempt to make far too many things secret. Much attention has been paid to the over-classification of intelligence information, but the over-classification of scientific

information is just as insidious.

No matter how many bits of intelligence or scientific information are made secret, the fact remains that determined terrorists have a multitude of fully described weapons systems to employ in an attack. By stifling publication of basic scientific research into materials that could have weapons potential, the opportunity to develop useful countermeasures becomes significantly diminished.

The “genetic selection” experiments to which I referred are described in one of the two papers that were up for redaction. It showed that by simply passing the bird flu virus through ferrets multiple times, a version of the virus that is more deadly to mammals (and presumably humans) was produced. But as I pointed out in the post, bioterrorists already have available a number of deadly agents that don’t require further research to make them effective. By censoring the work on more deadly bird flu, flow of information to researchers who wish to develop treatments for the disease (and these researchers vastly outnumber bioterrorists) is inhibited. Although those wanting to censor the work intended to make the full details available to a select few, that “solution” is untenable in that it predetermines just who is “important” enough to receive the information. Free flow of information is key to research and one can never predict just who will make the next advance, so pre-selecting those who get the key information is a silly notion.

The good news is that scientific research is an international process, and so “advisory” boards hand-picked by the US “homeland security” lobby do not have the final say. Today’s New York Times, in a front page story, reports that the scientific papers will be published in their entirety. The narrow-mindedness of how the US government has come to stifle scientific thought comes through loud and clear in this article.

The final decision on publication was made at a large meeting held by the World Health Organization in Geneva:

The announcement, made on Friday by the World Health Organization, follows two months of heated debate about the flu research. The recommendation to publish the work in full came from a meeting of 22 experts in flu and public health from various countries who met on Thursday and Friday in Geneva at the organization's headquarters to discuss "urgent issues" raised by the research.

Most of the group felt that any theoretical risk of the virus's being used by terrorists was far outweighed by the "real and present danger" of similar flu viruses in the wild, and by the need to study them and freely share information that could help identify the exact changes that might signal that a virus is developing the ability to cause a pandemic, said Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who represented the United States at the meeting.

Bowing to the US government's security hysteria, Fauci, who has had a brilliant career as both a researcher and an administrator, wound up spouting nonsense to the Times that would make any scientist outside the influence of the government blush:

"The group consensus was that it was much more important to get this information to scientists in an easy way to allow them to work on the problem for the good of public health," Dr. Fauci said. "It was not unanimous, but a very strong consensus."

But the United States was not part of that consensus, Dr. Fauci said. He said

he still agreed with the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, which recommended in December that the research be published only in a redacted form, for safety reasons.

Way to go Dr. Fauci. You just took a position that confirms what outsiders easily see as continued actions by the United States government that put science clearly at a strong disadvantage to politics.