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CORONAVIRUS

In Major Shift, NIH Admits Funding Risky Virus Research in Wuhan

A spokesman for Dr. Fauci says he has been “entirely truthful,” but a new letter belatedly acknowledging the National Institutes of Health’s support for virus-enhancing research adds more heat to the ongoing debate over whether a lab leak could have sparked the pandemic.

BY KATHERINE EBAN

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“I totally resent the lie you are now propagating.”

Dr. **Anthony Fauci** appeared to be channeling the frustration of millions of Americans when he spoke those words during an invective-laden, made-for-Twitter Senate hearing on July 20. You didn't have to be a Democrat to be fed up with all the xenophobic finger-pointing and outright disinformation, coming mainly from the right, up to and including the claim that COVID-19 was a bioweapon cooked up in a lab.

The immediate target of Dr. Fauci's wrath was Senator **Rand Paul**, who was pressing the nation's top doctor to say whether the National Institutes of Health had ever funded risky coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Based on new information disclosed by the National Institutes of Health, however, Paul might have been onto something.

On Wednesday, the NIH sent a letter to members of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce that acknowledged two facts. One was that EcoHealth Alliance, a New York City-based nonprofit that partners with far-flung laboratories to research and prevent the outbreak of emerging diseases, did indeed enhance a bat coronavirus to become potentially more infectious to humans, which the NIH letter described as an “unexpected result” of the research it funded that was carried out in partnership with the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The second was that EcoHealth Alliance violated the terms of its grant conditions stipulating that it had to report if its research increased the viral growth of a pathogen by tenfold.

The NIH based these disclosures on a research progress report that EcoHealth Alliance sent to the agency in August, roughly two years after it was supposed to. An NIH spokesperson told *Vanity Fair* that Dr. Fauci was “entirely truthful in his statements to Congress,” and that he did not have the progress report that detailed the controversial research at the time he testified in July. But EcoHealth Alliance appeared to contradict that claim, and said in a statement: “These data were reported as soon as we were made aware, in our year four report in April 2018.”

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The **letter from the NIH**, and an **accompanying analysis**, stipulated that the virus EcoHealth Alliance was researching could not have sparked the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, given the sizable genetic differences between the two. In a statement issued Wednesday, NIH director Dr. **Francis Collins** said that his agency “wants to set the record straight” on EcoHealth Alliance’s research, but added that any claims that it could have caused the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are “demonstrably false.”

EcoHealth Alliance said in a statement that the science clearly proved that its research could not have led to the pandemic, and that it was “working with the NIH to promptly address what we believe to be a misconception about the grant’s reporting requirements and what the data from our research showed.”

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But the NIH letter—coming after months of congressional demands for more information—seemed to underscore that America’s premier science institute has been less than forthcoming about risky research it has funded and failed to properly monitor. Instead of helping to lead a search for COVID-19’s origins, with the pandemic now firmly in its 19th month, the NIH has circled the wagons, defending its grant system and scientific judgment against a rising tide of questions. “It’s just another chapter in a sad tale of inadequate oversight, disregard for risk, and insensitivity to the importance of transparency,” said Stanford microbiologist Dr. **David Relman**. “Given all of the sensitivity about this work, it’s difficult to understand why NIH and EcoHealth have still not explained a number of irregularities with the reporting on this grant.”

The disclosures of the last four months—since *Vanity Fair* was first to detail how conflicts of interest resulting from U.S. government funding of controversial virology research **hampered America’s investigation into COVID-19’s origins**—present an increasingly disturbing picture.

Early last month, The Intercept **published** more than 900 pages of documents it obtained through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against the NIH, relating to EcoHealth Alliance's grant research. But there was one document missing, a fifth and final progress report that EcoHealth Alliance had been required to submit at the end of its grant period in 2019.

In its letter Wednesday, NIH included that **missing progress report**, which was dated August 2021. That report described a "limited experiment," as the NIH letter phrased it, in which laboratory mice infected with an altered virus became "sicker than those infected with" a naturally occurring one.

The letter did not mention the phrase "gain-of-function research" that has become so central to the bitter clashes over COVID-19's origins. That type of controversial research—the manipulation of pathogens with the aim of making them more infectious in order to gauge their risk to humans—has divided the virology community. A review system established in 2017 requires federal agencies to particularly scrutinize any research proposals that involve enhancing a pathogen's infectiousness to humans.

Dr. Fauci's spokesperson told *Vanity Fair* that EcoHealth Alliance's research did not fall under that framework, since the experiments being funded "were not reasonably expected to increase transmissibility or virulence in humans."

However, **Alina Chan**, a Boston-based scientist and coauthor of the book *Viral: The Search for the Origin of COVID-19*, said the NIH was in a "very challenging position. They funded research internationally to help study novel pathogens and prevent against them. But they had no way to know what viruses had been collected, what experiments had been conducted, and what accidents might have occurred."

As scientists remain in a stalemate over the pandemic's origins, another disclosure last month made clear that EcoHealth Alliance, in partnership with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was aiming to do the kind of research that could accidentally have led to the pandemic. On September 20, a group of internet sleuths calling themselves DRASTIC (short for Decentralized Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) released a leaked \$14 million grant proposal that EcoHealth Alliance had submitted in 2018 to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

It proposed partnering with the Wuhan Institute of Virology and constructing SARS-related bat coronaviruses into which they would insert "human-specific cleavage sites" as a way to

“evaluate growth potential” of the pathogens. Perhaps not surprisingly, DARPA rejected the proposal, assessing that it failed to fully address the risks of gain-of-function research.

The leaked grant proposal struck a number of scientists and researchers as significant for one reason. One distinctive segment of SARS-CoV-2’s genetic code is a furin cleavage site that makes the virus more infectious by allowing it to efficiently enter human cells. That is just the feature that EcoHealth Alliance and the Wuhan Institute of Virology had proposed to engineer in the 2018 grant proposal. “If I applied for funding to paint Central Park purple and was denied, but then a year later we woke up to find Central Park painted purple, I’d be a prime suspect,” said **Jamie Metz**, a former executive vice president of the Asia Society, who sits on the **World Health Organization’s advisory committee on human genome editing** and has been calling for a transparent investigation into COVID-19’s origins.

The claims of a lab origin, made without evidence in April 2020 by President **Donald Trump**, have turned into a legitimate, long-haul hunt for the truth that even U.S. intelligence agencies cannot seem to determine. This summer an intelligence review ordered by President **Joe Biden** drew no definitive conclusions but left open the possibility that the virus leaked from a laboratory in Wuhan, China.

The NIH’s letter to Congress stated that the agency is giving EcoHealth five days to submit any unpublished data from the experiments it funded. Republican leaders of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, who in June asked the NIH to demand such data, said in a statement Wednesday that “it’s unacceptable that the NIH delayed asking EcoHealth Alliance to submit unpublished data about risky research that they were required to under the terms of their grant.”

Meanwhile, members of the DRASTIC coalition have continued their research. As one member, **Gilles Demaneuf**, a data scientist in New Zealand, told *Vanity Fair*, “I cannot be sure that [COVID-19 originated from] a research-related accident or infection from a sampling trip. But I am 100% sure there was a massive cover-up.”

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