

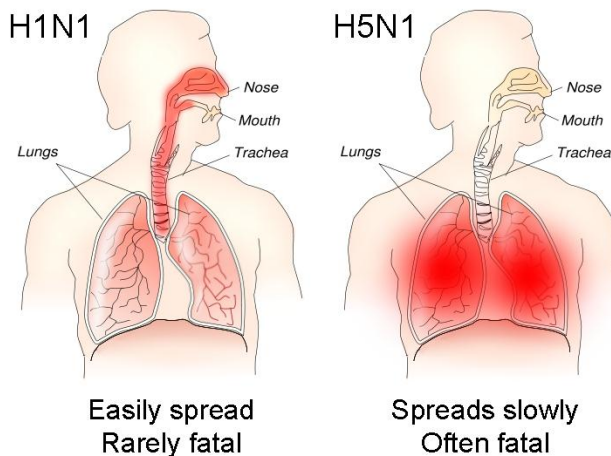
Work on Airborne H5N1 Virus Halted

by TIFFANY LIU under mentor VALERIE BROWN

Researchers studying the transmission of a deadly airborne strain of the H5N1 bird flu virus published a letter in both *Science* and *Nature* last month, announcing that they have suspended their work for 60 days to discuss the merits of this controversial research. Primary concerns regarding this research include the potential for this virus to escape laboratories and its possible use by bioterrorists.

Although details about the research have been withheld from publication at the request of the U.S. National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, the authors of the study explained that this controversial work was undertaken to better understand the evolution and transmission of an influenza virus from animals into humans.

This research was being conducted at several laboratories with different animal models. Specifically, researchers from two independent studies conducted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and The Netherlands' Erasmus MC in Rotterdam determined that a viral protein from the avian strain of the virus enables the transmission of H5N1 in ferrets.



Flu takes to the air. Unlike the common H1N1 virus, H5N1 is more lethal and has shown potential to be more readily transmissible.

Image: "H1N1 versus H5N1 pathology" by TimVickers available under Creative Commons license at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AH1N1_versus_H5N1_pathology.png.

Despite its controversial nature, Yoshihiro Kawaoka, University of Wisconsin-Madison's lead researcher on the study and a co-author of the letter, contends that the study's benefits outweigh the potential dangers. In a January 20 Reuters story, Kawaoka said, "I counter that H5N1 viruses circulating in nature already pose a threat because influenza viruses mutate constantly and can cause pandemics with great losses of life."

Kawaoka is not alone in his viewpoint. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health and an *ex officio* member of the National Science Advisory Board of Biosecurity, stated in the Jan. 20 story that the board is in unanimous agreement that the research is valuable.

According to the World Health Organization, a preliminary consultation has been scheduled to meet this month in Geneva to discuss the key facts of the study. Another meeting is anticipated at a later date to discuss broader concerns regarding this research. ■

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