

Editorial Éditorial



Is there ever good reason to not publish good science?

Peut-on justifier la non-publication de bons travaux scientifiques?

Carlton Gyles

Freedom of expression is a cherished feature of democratic societies and, in Canada this freedom is enshrined in the Charter of Rights. In the research world, expression often takes the form of scientific publication and freedom to publish is a critically important aspect of scientific life. A recent case involving publication of scientific information that is considered to have the potential to be dangerous has triggered a debate on this issue (1). The research at the centre of the controversy involves the creation of an H5N1 avian influenza virus with mutations that render it easily transmissible between ferrets, animals that have similarities to humans in lung physiology and respiratory tract receptors for influenza viruses. Ferrets appear to closely mimic the response of humans to the virus; they transmit the seasonal human influenza viruses efficiently but transmit the avian influenza viruses poorly. It is assumed that this H5N1 virus, which has been selected by passage through ferrets will also pass readily from person to person. Wild H5N1 viruses are associated with a high mortality rate (about 50%) but poor transmissibility among humans (2).

There are 2 concerns about the modified H5N1 influenza virus. One is that escape from the laboratory could result in an influenza pandemic; the other is that publication of the characteristics of the genetically altered virus could provide a blueprint for a bioterrorism weapon that could be used by so-called “rogue states” or malicious individuals.

There has been vigorous debate in the scientific community and in the media about whether the studies in question should be published (1–4). The media hype has been intense; the virus has been referred to as “a man-made flu virus that could change world history if it were ever set free” and as a virus that could “trigger an influenza pandemic, quite possibly with many millions of deaths” (3). The rationale for the research is clear and compelling: we know little about the features of the influenza virus that cause it to be highly transmissible among humans and this knowledge is necessary for a good assessment of the pandemic risk associated with the various influenza viruses in the animal reservoirs.

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Some scientists argue that the risk of escape from the laboratory is almost zero, as the studies are conducted in contained laboratories that are highly regulated and closely monitored. However, breaches in high-level containment laboratories have occurred in the past. Some scientists downplay the potential virulence of the virus, indicating that it would likely need to exchange some of its genes with a human strain of the virus in order to be highly transmissible among humans. It is also noted that flu pandemics have been caused by H1, H2 and H3 viruses but never by H5 viruses — but there could be a first time for an H5 virus.

The 2 groups of influenza researchers who have created the modified H5N1 virus have established a voluntary 60-day moratorium on further research on the virus and the question of publication was reviewed, first by the U.S. National Science Advisory Board (NSAB) and later by a group of scientists who met in Geneva under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO) (1–4). The NSAB advised that a version of the manuscript that left out critical details should be published and mechanisms found to make the full paper available to influenza researchers and others who need to know. The Geneva group recommended that the papers be published in their entirety — a recommendation which has been supported by the WHO. There is agreement on all sides that the science involved in the papers is excellent and important for future studies.

de la recherche est claire et irréfutable : nous savons très peu à propos des caractéristiques du virus de la grippe qui le rendent hautement transmissible parmi les humains et ces connaissances sont nécessaires pour faire une bonne évaluation du risque associé aux divers virus de la grippe dans les réservoirs animaux.

Certains scientifiques font valoir que le risque de fuite du laboratoire est presque nul, car les études sont réalisées dans des laboratoires confinés fortement réglementés et étroitement surveillés. Cependant, des atteintes ont eu lieu par le passé dans les laboratoires de confinement de haut niveau. Certains scientifiques minimisent la virulence potentielle du virus, indiquant qu'il faudrait probablement qu'il échange certains de ses gènes avec une souche de virus humaine afin de devenir hautement transmissible chez les humains. On signale également que les pandémies de grippe ont été causées par les virus H1, H2 et H3 mais jamais par les virus H5 — mais il pourrait y avoir une première pour un virus H5.

Les deux groupes de chercheurs de la grippe qui ont créé le virus H5N1 modifié ont établi un moratorium volontaire de 60 jours sur de nouvelles recherches sur le virus et la question de la publication a été examinée, d'abord par le National Science Advisory Board (NSAB) des États-Unis, puis par un groupe de scientifiques qui se sont réunis à Genève sous les auspices de l'Organisation mondiale de la santé (OMS) (1–4). Le NSAB a informé qu'une version du manuscrit omettant des détails cruciaux devrait être publiée et que des mécanismes devraient être trouvés pour distribuer l'article complet aux chercheurs sur la grippe et à d'autres personnes qui ont besoin de connaître le contenu. Le groupe de Genève a recommandé que les articles soient publiés intégralement — une recommandation qui a

This issue, pitting scientific advancement against risk to the public, is a difficult one (2). The debate has highlighted the importance of enhanced monitoring and biosafety for laboratories engaged in this kind of research, targeted surveillance of field strains of H5N1 avian influenza viruses, and continued research on protection against influenza viruses through vaccines and other interventions. Distinguished scientists are lined up on both sides of the issue (2,4) and it will likely take time and intense deliberation before rational guidelines can be drawn up concerning the conduct and publication of research that has the potential to cause harm to the public, through accidental or deliberate measures.

References

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été appuyée par l'OMS. Il y a consensus que la science traitée dans les articles est excellente et importante pour la recherche future.

Il s'agit d'une question difficile qui oppose les progrès scientifiques au risque potentiel pour le public (2). Le débat a souligné l'importance d'une surveillance et d'une biosécurité améliorées pour les laboratoires effectuant ce type de recherche, d'une surveillance ciblée des souches sauvages des virus de la grippe aviaire H5N1 et d'une recherche continue sur la protection contre les virus de la grippe à l'aide de vaccins et d'autres interventions. Des scientifiques distingués se sont rangés des deux côtés de la question (2, 4) et il faudra probablement du temps et des délibérations intenses avant que des lignes directrices rationnelles puissent être établies pour régir la réalisation et la publication de travaux de recherche ayant le potentiel de causer du tort au public, par des mesures accidentelles ou délibérées.

Renvois

1. KUEHN, B.M. 2012. «International debate erupts over research on potentially dangerous bird flu strains», *JAMA*, 2012, vol. 307, n° 10, p. 1009–1012. doi: 10.1001/jama.2012.230
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