

COVID 'lab leak' boosters grasp at straws

It seems barely a week can go by without some sensationalist and scientifically illiterate journalist trying to revive the so called "lab leak" theory, that the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) which causes COVID-19 was engineered in and escaped from China's Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). Having failed for nearly two years to find a single shred of proof, "lab leak" boosters have instead resorted to emulating another famous fictional experiment, stitching together mismatched bits and pieces into a shambling semblance of a real body of evidence in a manner reminiscent of Mary Shelley's Dr Victor Frankenstein. The latest efforts in this regard attempt to cobble together innocuous everyday lab work, minor inconsistencies in the reporting of data, and proposals for research projects that were never conducted into proof that the WIV and its American collaborators were doing undisclosed "dangerous 'gain-of-function' research" that could have created the virus. Unfortunately, however, the most misleading reports have come not only from the usual myrmidons of the mainstream media propaganda machine, but from The Intercept, an "alternative" online media outlet supposedly devoted to adversarial investigative journalism but which has a history of parroting the establishment line at crucial junctures.

Founded in 2014 by journalists Jeremy Scahill and Glenn Greenwald and documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, The Intercept purports to be independent. Its non-profit parent company First Look Media, however, was founded and is funded by French-American billionaire Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay, whose "philanthropic investment firm" Omidyar Network helped fund so-called "media activists" during the early years of the French-UK-US Dirty War on Syria to whitewash the jihadists and mercenaries who would later become ISIS as "moderate rebels". The supposedly anti-war Scahill did his share of the same, demonising Syrians who revealed the truth about the jihadists as "regime" apologists. Scahill is the only remaining member of The Intercept's founding trio: Greenwald resigned in October 2020 after the outlet refused to publish, and tried to prevent him publishing elsewhere, an article on President Joe Biden's allegedly corrupt business dealings in Ukraine and China while he was vice president in the Obama Administration; Poitras was sacked the following month, after she raised concerns about The Intercept's failure to protect its sources.

'New details', still no evidence



The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) is again the target of claims that a lab leak caused the COVID-19 pandemic, but again the claims aren't supported by evidence. Photo: Wikipedia

The latest furor centres mainly around a set of US National Institutes of Health (NIH) documents The Intercept obtained under the US *Freedom of Information Act* in early September. Under the headline "New details emerge about coronavirus research at Chinese lab", journalists Sharon Lerner and Mara Hvistendahl revealed on 7 September that "The Intercept has obtained more than 900 pages of documents detailing the work of EcoHealth Alliance, a US-based health organisation that used federal money to fund bat coronavirus research at the [WIV]. The trove of documents includes two previously unpublished grant proposals that were funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [NIAID], as well as project updates relating to EcoHealth Alliance's research, which *has been scrutinised amid increased interest in the origins of the pandemic*. ... The documents contain several critical details about the research in Wuhan, including the fact that *key experimental work with humanised mice* was conducted at a biosafety level 3 lab at Wuhan University Centre for Animal Experiment—and not at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, as was previously assumed. The documents *raise additional questions about the theory that the pandemic may have begun in a lab accident*, an idea that [EcoHealth Alliance President Peter] Daszak has aggressively dismissed." (Emphasis added.) Given such a premise, one might expect evidence that EcoHealth and the WIV had been doing so-called "gain of function" (GoF) research after all. By the US government's definition, GoF is research "that is reasonably anticipated to create, transfer, or use PPPs [pathogens of pandemic potential] resulting from the enhancement of a pathogen's transmissibility or virulence in humans". Doing such research would be contrary to EcoHealth and the WIV's previous statements and those of NIAID Director Dr Anthony Fauci, including during the latter's testimony to the US Senate in July. But no. As

American journalist Joshua Cho wrote in a 29 September analysis¹ for Mint Press News, in both their initial 7 September report and numerous follow-up articles, "The Intercept's journalists don't demonstrate a clear understanding of the significance of the 'reasonably anticipated' clause in official

definitions of GoF—or the significance of the fact that human beings are different animal species from transgenic mice”.

In fact, University of Iowa microbiologist Professor Stanley Perlman told Cho that other than being more up to date in that it cited EcoHealth progress reports from 2018-19, The Intercept’s reporting on its trove of documents had imparted “essentially no new information” beyond what was already revealed in a much-cited (and -misrepresented) study led by Prof. Ralph S. Baric of the University of North Carolina, in collaboration with a team led by WIV head virologist Dr Shi Zhengli, the world’s leading authority on bat-borne coronaviruses. Their research involved creating so-called “chimeric” viruses,² in which a particular feature from one virus—in this case, the “spike” protein coronaviruses use to bind to and gain entrance via a receptor on the membrane of a target cell—is grafted onto another, in order to test its ability to infect different species. In a 20 October letter to the US House of Representatives Committee on Energy and Commerce, in response to questions prompted by The Intercept’s reports, NIH Principal Deputy Director Dr Lawrence Tabak wrote that “The limited experiment described in the final progress report provided by EcoHealth Alliance was testing if spike proteins from [two] naturally occurring bat coronaviruses circulating in China were capable of binding to the human ACE2 receptor in a mouse model. All other aspects of the mice, including the immune system, remained unchanged. ... The research plan was reviewed by NIH in advance of funding, and NIH determined that it did not ... fit the definition of research involving enhanced pathogens of pandemic potential [i.e., GoF research] because these bat coronaviruses had not been shown to infect humans.” The only minor controversy is that Tabak said EcoHealth was late in reporting the result.

Virologist Dr James Duehr of the University of Pittsburgh (who also helped fact-check Cho’s article) explained the utility of such experiments in a May 2020 [Reddit post](#). “If you want to show that a certain part of a virus is what allows it to infect a certain type of cells”, he wrote, “you take that part, and you put it on a virus that, right now, can’t infect those cells. Then, when you make the chimera, you try and infect the cells with it. If you’re successful, you’ve shown that the part you spliced in (the ‘spike’ in this case) was sufficient for infection! And you can also go to the original virus, the one you stole the spike from, and trade its spike for the new one that couldn’t infect. And if, now, the old virus with the new spike can’t infect, then you’ve also shown the spike was ‘necessary’. ...



EcoHealth Alliance founder Peter Daszak (left), appearing in a 2004 US 60 Minutes story “Hunting Viruses” about his efforts to find the source of the deadly Nipah virus, which has a 40 per cent fatality rate, on an island off the coast of the Malay Peninsula. Daszak’s collaboration with WIV in hunting for viruses to protect humans has made him a target of the unproven lab leak theories. Photo: Screenshot

“Along the way, you’ve demonstrated that part of the virus (the spike) would be a great target for a vaccine! And that drugs that inactivate this part of the virus could be very useful.” Duehr told Cho, as did several other experts with no vested interest in the WIV or EcoHealth, that making chimeras is perfectly ordinary lab work that does not in any way constitute GoF research, except under outdated decadesold definitions that were discarded precisely because they were so broad as to be practically useless. Nor could such experiments—either Baric’s or their 2018 successors— have produced SARS-CoV-2 in any case, because it is not a chimeric virus. And as the NIH’s Tabak noted, both viruses used in the 2018 experiments “are decades removed from SARS-CoV-2 evolutionarily”, thus neither could possibly have been its progenitor.

Wrote Cho, “When one understands the science, it is clear why all the parties involved with the WIV deny that US money was funding GoF research there, why WIV scientists claim they haven’t performed GoF research, and why there’s no evidence they’re ‘lying’.”

Much ado about nothing

The only new information to have emerged thus far, from documents leaked separately to a dodgy, mainly pseudonymous “online research group” of supposed scientists known as DRASTIC and reported by The Intercept and others, is that in 2018 EcoHealth submitted a grant proposal for *actual* GoF research to the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). “Among the scientific tasks the group described in its proposal, *which was rejected by DARPA* [emphasis added], was the creation of full-length infectious clones of bat SARS-related coronaviruses and the insertion of a tiny part of the virus known as a ‘proteolytic cleavage site’ into bat coronaviruses. Of particular interest was a type of cleavage site able to interact with furin, an enzyme expressed in human cells. ... This strange feature on the spike protein of the virus had never been seen in SARS-related beta coronaviruses, the class to which SARSCoV-2 [belongs]”. Again, The Intercept seeks to imply a connection where none exists, since the original SARS virus is only very distantly related to its recent almost-namesake. Also not mentioned is that as eminent US microbiologist Dr Robert Garry noted in a May 2021 interview,³ four of the five sub-genuses of beta-coronaviruses include several known species with furin cleavage sites (several of which—including the deadly Middle East Respiratory Syndrome virus—are known to infect humans), which suggests it was always likely that the fifth did, too. More importantly, EcoHealth proposed to conduct the research *in the United States, not China*, under the supervision of the US military (hence its application to DARPA, rather than the NIH).

EcoHealth also proposed to trial a novel vaccination method whereby “skin-penetrating nanoparticles containing ‘novel chimeric spike proteins’ of bat coronaviruses”—not live chimeric viruses, as the London *Telegraph* erroneously reported—would be released in aerosol form into caves in Yunnan, China to inoculate local bat populations. Unlike the previous proposal, this research was to have been conducted partly in China, but it doesn’t matter because, as noted above, *neither project was approved for funding and thus no research was conducted*. Unable to find any real evidence, the Intercept has instead elected to blow a huge cloud of smoke in the hope that the reader will decide that there must be a fire somewhere. Besides outing itself as incompetent at best and controlled opposition at worst, The Intercept’s peddling of Anglo-American imperial war propaganda against China provides a useful object lesson in why one should always judge an argument by its merits, not its source.

Footnotes:

[1. “Lab-leak, gain-of-function, and the media myths swirling around the Wuhan Institute of Virology”](#), Mint Press News, 29 Sept. 2021.

[2.](#) In Greek myth, Chimera (also spelled Chimaera) was a fire-breathing monster resembling a lion, with the head of a goat sprouting from its back, and a snake for a tail. The name has come to be used as a general term for a creature composed of parts of various animals.

[3.](#) “COVID lab leak ‘science’ refuted”, AAS, 9 June 2021.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 27 October 2021