

World-renowned virologist calls for research stop

[Martina Frei Infosperber](#) / 11.04.2023

"The big pandemic is coming," fears the former CDC director and calls for a moratorium on "gain of function" research.

The most likely answer to the question of where the coronavirus came from is: "Science caused this pandemic." Virologist Robert Redfield recently said this in a video interview with ["The Hill"](#). Redfield headed the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) until January 2021 and was a member of the US coronavirus task force.

For more than three years, the question has been raised as to whether so-called "gain of function" research (GOF), in which microbes are intentionally made more dangerous, led to the corona pandemic. Redfield thinks this is much more plausible than the virus jumped from animals to humans hypothesis.

The new head of science at the WHO, Jeremy Farrar, also estimated the probability that Sars-CoV-2 escaped a laboratory at the end of January 2020 at fifty: fifty. At the time, other scientists even feared that the probability was 70:30 for a laboratory origin.

In a hastily convened video conference, they exchanged views with Anthony Fauci and [Francis Collins](#) at the beginning of the pandemic. Collins was director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) until the end of 2021, under which Fauci headed a large institute called NIAID (National Institute for Allergies and Infectious Diseases). The US, Collins and Fauci (but also Europe) [Europa](#) funded gain-of-function research in Wuhan and elsewhere.

"One death is enough and the research program is shut down"

The mere fact that scientists with insight considered it possible that Sars-CoV-2 was a laboratory product or was released by a laboratory accident should have led to a public discussion as to whether such research should continue. Columnist David Wallace-Wells recently made this point in the [New York Times](#).

But instead of launching this discussion, high-ranking scientists devoted energy to discrediting the laboratory hypothesis and steering the media discussion towards "natural origins".

Researchers with a conflict of interest

For example, in emails that have since been leaked, Francis Collins wrote [schrieb Francis Collins](#) that the laboratory origin hypothesis could potentially seriously harm science and international harmony. Those researchers who make a career out of "gain of function" research probably fear the same thing.

"One death is enough and the research program is shut down and I'm thrown out," the director of an Australian research institute once said. This was reported by the world-renowned microbiologist Simon Wain-Hobson on [the microbiologist](#).

If it were to be clearly shown that Sars-CoV-2 is not a naturally occurring virus, the global "gain of function" research community would have to reckon with great difficulties.

The Dutch virologist Ron Fouchier can sing a song about it. In 2011, he caused a stir with his research. Fouchier created - in his words - "probably one of the most dangerous viruses you

can make" - an H5N1 avian flu virus that is airborne from ferret to ferret. Influenza viruses that spread among ferrets are also generally passed from person to person.

If these new viruses are ever released, they could cause a human pandemic, Wain-Hobson explained in the [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#). Fouchier's experiments therefore triggered discussions worldwide and were temporarily stopped.

Barack Obama issued a moratorium

Former US President Barack Obama subsequently issued a research moratorium on "gain of function" research, a decision that was also preceded by several laboratory accidents. For example, instead of requesting harmless flu viruses, deadly bird flu viruses were accidentally sent from one lab to another, the [New York Times](#) reported in 2014.

Fouchier, on the other hand, considered the potential risks of "gain-of-function" research, in which microbes or organisms are intentionally made more dangerous, to be small. In the meantime, it has become known that at the beginning of the pandemic, Fouchier was involved in the background when the media dismissed the laboratory hypothesis for Sars-CoV-2 as improbable for a long time (Infosperber reported)

Two letters to the editor in the renowned journals "[Nature Medicine](#)" and "[The Lancet](#)" made a significant contribution to this. In "The Lancet" the new head of science at the WHO, Jeremy Farrar, the German virologist Christian Drosten and other scientists wrote on February 19, 2020, they strongly condemned conspiracy theories according to which Sars-CoV-2 had no natural origin. They stated that there were no conflicts of interest.

Suppressed public debate

The clear language in both letters to the editor "seems to have certainly suppressed the debate about where the pandemic virus came from," said David Wallace-Wells in the "New York Times" and asked: "Wouldn't it have been better, even with a small probability of one laboratory by simply saying, 'Let's do everything we can to make sure this doesn't happen in the future'?"

Or at least do everything we can in terms of oversight and regulation so that next time we're really sure what's going on?"

But the question of whether such research is of public interest remained and remains untouched in the media discussion about the origin of the pandemic virus - although more than three years after the beginning of the pandemic, countless dead and sick people are still wondering whether the "gain of function» research may have caused all of this.

It could do that, and it could do even worse.

David Wallace-Wells gives some figures: Since 2010, the number of high-security laboratories (BSL-4) worldwide has more than doubled. There is no official oversight, let alone oversight, of these labs.

In addition, there are an uncertain number of BSL-2 and an estimated 1,500 BSL-3 labs that could also do "potentially hazardous" work (although many of these would simply serve hospital labs or similar civilian purposes). Plus the so-called BSL 3+ laboratories, which, according to a critical scientist, are "almost completely unregulated". Many countries have practically "zero overview".

"The crux is that a pandemic virus strain cannot be predicted"

The "gain of function" research is justified, among other things, by the fact that science can thus better predict future developments of viruses and develop vaccinations or drugs against them. But the currently rampant bird flu viruses seem to have developed differently than researchers had expected, writes Wallace-Wells. As is well known, the scientists were also surprised by the omicron virus variant in Sars-CoV-2.

Simon Wain-Hobson is convinced that "gain of function" research will never fulfill its promise of predicting the next flu pandemic and is making the world a more dangerous place. [nie erfüllen können](#). "The crux is that a pandemic virus strain cannot be predicted - and thus the propagated benefit [of "gain of function" research - ed. Red.] lapsed," argued the emeritus professor at the Pasteur Institute in Paris in November 2022 on "[the-microbiologist.com](https://www.the-microbiologist.com)" and continued:

We would never be able to determine what these engineered viruses are capable of because animal models are of limited predictive value for human infection and experimentally infecting humans with such viruses is out of the question. "Nevertheless, gain-of-function virology is on the rise," says Wain-Hobson.

But this research isn't just about viruses that are killing off one person at a time, Wain-Hobson said. But also about viruses that could infect something as important as rice plants, for example.

People kept telling him: "Why should we create new viruses that are dangerous for humans? Scientists shouldn't do any harm."

"We urgently need a far more open discussion before the next inevitable accident," Wain-Hobson demands, and he is not alone.

Redfield draws a horror scenario

Former CDC director Robert Redfield even advocates a moratorium on "gain of function" research and believes: "The great pandemic is coming." In an interview with "[The Hill](#)" he drew the horror scenario of an upcoming bird flu pandemic. In Redfield's assessment, this coming pandemic will not be triggered by the virus jumping from animals to humans, but by "gain of function" research or by deliberate bioterrorism. A public discussion is needed as to whether gain of function research is desired by the population and, if so, how it can be carried out safely and responsibly.

But even after more than three years of guessing where Sars-CoV-2 came from, this discussion does not take place in the general public.

Former CDC Director Robert Redfield made other explosive statements. More on this in this article on Infosperber: "Pros and cons of the laboratory hypothesis: the struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation"

Original article in German:

<https://www.infosperber.ch/gesundheit/weltweit-bekannter-virologe-fordert-forschungsstopp/>