Press Release

Embargoed 00:01GMT 3 April 2012

Flu, mutations and transmission: to publish or not to publish?

3 April 2012, LONDON: As the European Congress of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ECCMID)—the world’s largest conference on infectious diseases—draws to a close, a late-breaking symposium will focus on the mutant H5N1 avian flu viruses recently created by researchers at two leading influenza laboratories in the US and Netherlands.

The symposium, to be chaired by Professor Ab Osterhaus, head of the department of virology at the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam, and Professor PJ Openshaw of the department of respiratory medicine at Imperial College, London, will address the true nature of the threat posed by H5N1, the biosecurity policies in place for safeguarding public health, and the controversy now swirling around the question: to publish or not to publish the full details of those experiments?

“We strongly feel that the benefits of sharing this state-of-the-art data by far outweigh the potential risks,” says Osterhaus, long a vocal advocate of greater pandemic flu preparedness and a co-investigator on the Erasmuc MC team that mutated the H5N1 virus. Joining Osterhaus will be Dr. Ron Fouchier, the lead investigator on the study at Erasmus MC, and Rebecca Moritz, a research compliance specialist in the Office of Biological Safety at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where Dr. Yoshihiro Kawaoka led a separate study of mutant H5N1.

The subject of intense scrutiny over the past three months, those studies set off a heated debate after a review by the US National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB), which recommended that the papers—to be published by the journals Science and Nature—"not include the methodological and other details that could enable replication of the experiments by those who would seek to do harm."

Both Fouchier and Kawaoka complied and voluntarily suspended their work on the viruses for 60 days. However, weeks later, a panel of experts convened by the World Health Organization (WHO) recommended overwhelmingly in favor of publishing the results after a months-long moratorium on the research. In the interim, the researchers and officials of the institutions are making an effort to clearly communicate to the scientific community and the public at large the implications of the work and the context in which it was conducted.

“I will provide an overview of the oversight during the course of our work, the biosafety measures taken, and the risks and benefits of the work and the
publication,” says Fouchier, who cites the “factual benefits for the advancement of science and public health” in defending the decision to publish his team’s work “in all of its detail.” Fouchier will also clarify several assumptions about the lethality and transmissibility of H5N1 viruses in ferrets, the animal model used in both National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded studies. Moritz, too, will touch on the publicly known aspects of Kawaoka’s work before focusing on the “significant oversight” involved in the research and the extensive biological safety measures in place at UW-Madison.

The floor will then be opened to a general discussion of the questions at the core of the controversy, including whether the experiments should be conducted; whether current oversight is sufficient and, if so, under what conditions; and whether the redacted data should be published.

The symposium concludes the final day of the 22nd ECCMID.

 ------------------------------------------------------------

Media Contact
Cathy Bartley, E-mail: cathy.bartley@bartley-robbs.co.uk Tel: +44 7958 561 671

The European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases is a non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of infection-related diseases. This is achieved by promoting and supporting research, education, training, and good medical practice.

www.escmid.org