DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

May 21, 2021

The Honorable Charles Grassley
United Sates Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Grassley:

Thank you for your letter regarding the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) support for biomedical research related to SARS-CoV-2, the NIH grant to the EcoHealth Alliance, and particular research technologies that modify viruses in what is sometimes referred to as "gain of function" (GOF) research. As Principal Deputy Director of NIH, I am pleased to respond to your inquiry.

Neither NIH nor the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases has ever approved any grant that would have supported GOF research on coronaviruses that would have increased their transmissibility or lethality for humans.

Some scientists use the term GOF research broadly to refer to any modification of a biological agent that confers new or enhanced activity to that agent. In some cases, this research is performed to give new properties to agents to allow them to grow and be studied in the lab; for example, the agent may be modified so that it can be studied in research animals. However, not all research that some label as GOF research entails the same level of risk. The subset of GOF research that is anticipated to enhance the transmissibility and/or virulence of potential pandemic pathogens, which could make them more dangerous to humans, has been the subject of substantial scrutiny and deliberation.

In 2017, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued its Framework for Guiding Funding Decisions about Proposed Research Involving Enhanced Potential Pandemic Pathogens (HHS P3CO Framework). The HHS P3CO Framework is intended to guide HHS funding decisions on proposed research that is reasonably anticipated to create, transfer, or use Potential Pandemic Pathogens (PPPs) resulting from the enhancement of a pathogen's transmissibility or virulence in humans (enhanced PPP) and seeks to preserve the benefits of life sciences research involving enhanced PPPs while minimizing potential biosafety and biosecurity risks.

As has been publicly stated, NIH awarded a grant to EcoHealth Alliance Inc., a research organization based in New York City, in June 2014. To support its work, EcoHealth made sub-awards to the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other institutions based in East Asia where coronaviruses tend to emerge and are prevalent. The application was subjected to rigorous peer review and did not propose research to enhance any coronavirus to be more transmissible or virulent. NIH is not currently funding the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The research proposed in the grant application sought to understand how bat coronaviruses evolve naturally in the environment to become transmissible to the human population. This included studying viral diversity in bat reservoirs, surveying people who work in live animal markets or other jobs with high exposure to wildlife for evidence of bat-coronavirus infection, and analyzing data to predict which newly discovered viruses pose the greatest threat to human health.

We agree that it is important to determine the origins of the virus and several investigations have been initiated to investigate the facts. In April 2020, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued a statement on its investigation into the origins of the outbreak. Additionally, in March 2021, the World Health Organization issued a report on a global study on the origins of SARS-CoV-2. Following issuance of that report, the U.S. Department of State issued a multi-country statement calling for "a rapid, independent, expert-led, and unimpeded evaluation" with "full access to all pertinent human, animal, and environmental data, research, and personnel involved in the early stages of the outbreak relevant to determining how this pandemic emerged."

NIH strongly supports the need for all efforts to understand the origins of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and is in favor of a thorough and independent investigation to that end.

Sincerely,

Lawrence A. Tabak, D.D.S., Ph.D.
Principal Deputy Director