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Transmission Studies Resume For Avian Flu

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In January 2012, influenza virus researchers from around the world announced a voluntary pause of 60 days on any research involving highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 viruses leading to the generation of viruses that are more transmissible in mammals (1). We declared a pause to this important research to provide time to explain the public health benefits of this work, to describe the measures in place to minimize possible risks, and to enable organizations and governments around the world to review their policies (for example, on biosafety, biosecurity, oversight, and communication) regarding these experiments.

During the past year, the benefits of this important research have been explained clearly in publications (2-7) and meetings (8-10). Measures to mitigate possible risks of the work have been detailed (11-13). The World Health Organization has released recommendations on laboratory biosafety for those conducting this research (14), and relevant authorities in several countries have reviewed the biosafety, biosecurity, and funding conditions under which further research would be conducted on the laboratory-modified H5N1 viruses (10, 15-17). Thus, acknowledging that the aims of the voluntary moratorium have been met in

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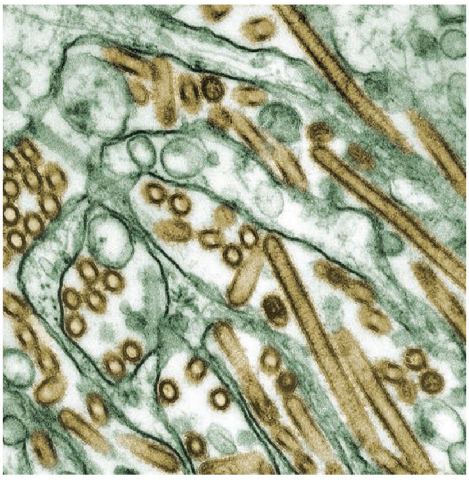
some countries and are close to being met in others, we declare an end to the voluntary moratorium on avian flu transmission studies.



H5N1 virus.

The controversy surrounding H5N1 virus transmission research has highlighted the need for a global approach to dealing with dualuse research of concern. Developing comprehensive solutions to resolve all the issues will take time. Meanwhile, H5N1 viruses continue to evolve in nature. Because H5N1 virus transmission studies are essential for pandemic preparedness and understanding the adaptation of influenza viruses to mammals, researchers who have approval from their governments and institutions to conduct this research safely, under appropriate biosafety and biosecurity conditions, have a public health responsibility to resume this important work. Scientists should not restart their work in countries where, as yet, no decision has been reached on the conditions for H5N1 virus transmission research. At this time, this includes the United States and U.S.-funded research conducted in other countries. Scientists should never conduct this type of research without the appropriate facilities, oversight, and all the necessary approvals. We consider biosafety level 3 conditions with the considerable enhancements (BSL-3+) outlined in the referenced publications (11-13) as appropriate for this type of work, but recognize that some countries may require BSL-4 conditions in accordance with applicable standards (such as Canada). We fully acknowledge that this research—as with any work on infectious agents—is not without risks. However, because the risk exists in nature that an H5N1 virus capable of transmission in mammals may emerge, the benefits of this work outweigh the risks.

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