



Written by [Dennis Behrendt](#) on April 14, 2020

## U.S. Funded Wuhan Lab, Questions Remain About Potential Role in Virus Outbreak

In a sensational report, the U.K.'s *Daily Mail* has revealed that a U.S. government agency provided millions of dollars in funding for the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the Chinese laboratory at the center of rumors that it was the source of the coronavirus outbreak.

“The Chinese laboratory at the center of scrutiny over a potential coronavirus leak has been using U.S. government money to carry out research on bats from the caves which scientists believe are the original source of the deadly outbreak,” the *Daily Mail* reported. “The Wuhan Institute of Virology undertook coronavirus experiments on mammals captured more than 1,000 miles away in Yunnan which were funded by a \$3.7 million grant from the US government,” the paper continued.



The funding, according to the paper, came from the National Institutes for Health (NIH), a U.S. government agency that is the largest funder of biomedical research in the world. According to the NIH, the organization provides more than \$32 billion per year in funding for research efforts worldwide.

According to the *Daily Mail* report, the \$3.7 million in funding for research into coronaviruses in bats resulted in a study published in the journal *PLoS Pathogens*, titled “Discovery of a rich gene pool of bat SARS-related coronaviruses provides new insights into the origin of SARS coronavirus.”

*PLoS Pathogens* provides further details about the source of funding for the study. According to the journal, in addition to funding from NIH, additional monies to support the work were provided by the National Natural Science Foundation of China, the China Mega-Project for Infectious Disease, and the Ministry of Science and Technology of China.

The report in the *Daily Mail*, though, suggests sinister overtones for this research by darkly suggesting that “news that COVID-19 bats were under research there means that a leak from the Wuhan laboratory can no longer be completely ruled out.”

Of course, anything is possible. But it is a fallacy to conclude that because something is possible, it consequently happened.

Moreover, the *Daily Mail* report stokes suspicions about the very existence of the research. Is it not nearly criminally irresponsible for these Chinese researchers to even conduct this research?

To this end, the paper quotes biosecurity expert Richard Ebright of Rutgers University, a skilled and



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respected scientist.

“Virus collection, culture, isolation, or animal infection would pose a substantial risk of infection of a lab worker, and from the lab worker then the public,” Ebright said according to the *Daily Mail*.

“He concluded,” the paper continued, “that the evidence left ‘a basis to rule out [that coronavirus is] a lab construct, but no basis to rule out a lab accident.’”

Again, however, it bears repeating that mere possibility of something does not necessitate that the thing postulated must exist or happen in reality.

What were the Wuhan researchers actually examining? They were, in fact, conducting extremely important research.

Those interested can read the full text of their results for free at [PLoS Pathogens](#). There we read that the researchers were trying to discover where the original SARS virus, which showed up in 2002, came from. Its source has been an enduring mystery. In introducing the rationale for their work, the researchers pointed out: “A critical gap remains in our understanding of how and where SARS-CoV originated from bat reservoirs.”

The research team made some very interesting discoveries. For example, they note that coronavirus (CoV) was more prevalent “in autumn (September and October) than in spring and early summer (April and May). This may be due to the establishment of a susceptible subpopulation of newborn bats which had not developed their own immunity after the parturition period.” This is an intriguing anecdote, especially in light of the current SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, which first was observed in late fall and early winter in China, consistent with this finding of increased prevalence of coronavirus in the studied bat population during that season.

Further to this, it is worth considering the important conclusions they reached.

According to the researchers, their findings “conclusively demonstrate that all building blocks of the pandemic SARS-CoV genome are present in bat SARSr-CoVs from a single location in Yunnan. The data show that frequent recombination events have happened among those SARSr-CoVs in the same cave.”

Moreover, they continued, “In addition, we have also revealed that various SARSr-CoVs capable of using human ACE2 are still circulating among bats in this region. Thus, the risk of spillover into people and emergence of a disease similar to SARS is possible. This is particularly important given that the nearest village to the bat cave we surveyed is only 1.1 km away, which indicates a potential risk of exposure to bats for the local residents. Thus, we propose that monitoring of SARSr-CoV evolution at this and other sites should continue, as well as examination of human behavioral risk for infection and serological surveys of people, to determine if spillover is already occurring at these sites and to design intervention strategies to avoid future disease emergence.”

Far from sinister, as the sensationalist report in the *Daily Mail* makes it seem, this research was remarkably prescient. It was, in fact, an early warning that something like the current pandemic was likely to occur at some point in the future.

As to funding, a legitimate concern is the use of American taxpayer dollars for science, either domestically or abroad. Proponents will point out that such funding enables scientists to conduct badly needed research, and that without the funding that research would not happen.

This, however, is untrue. Private laboratories conduct significant research all the time without government funding and develop an infinite variety of useful discoveries and technologies. A reasonable



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question to examine, in fact, would be whether a reduction in redistribution of tax dollars taken from the American people would enable a further increase in private funding for useful research. In addition to any other benefits such a change may bring, a move to increase private funding of research and decrease government involvement would remove, or at least reduce, suspicions that governments might have ulterior motives, such as weapons research, that influence their funding decisions. This is especially true since governments do not have a sterling track record of ethical behavior when it comes to certain research activities.

Additionally, the existence of this study, which was conducted at great cost over a number of years, raises further questions about the sincerity and truthfulness of the Chinese government in its response to the latest outbreak. As clearly revealed by this study, published in 2017, there was an imminent danger of viral spillover of a novel virulent form of the coronavirus to humans, something Chinese health officials should have been very aware of as a result of this work. Combined with other actions the Chinese officials took to limit accurate reporting on the outbreak in Wuhan, as detailed by the *Daily Mail* and others, it is increasingly evident that the Chinese government was at the very least disastrously incompetent in its handling of the outbreak.



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