

[Transcript] The News Agents / Did Covid-19 leak from a lab?

This is a global player original podcast.

The energy department says it now believes a lab leak in China is most likely the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lab leak theory is also an accidental theory.

It is that someone got infected in the lab and then it starts to spread.

Either they made a terrible mistake, probably it was incompetent, somebody was stupid, they didn't do the job that they should have done.

Tip yourself, or provide the needs, everything is possible.

When you look at the labs, I think this is really important.

You have to look at the circumstantial evidence of where they're located.

One of them is just two blocks away from that first amplification point, the market.

And that is an awfully large coincidence.

In fact, the WHO has said the lab leak is a credible theory and has asked China for its help.

That help has not been forthcoming.

They launched this relentless propaganda campaign to try to counter the narrative, to try to sow doubt and deflect blame.

There was even some misinformation that the 5G network was spreading the Wuhan virus.

Reporters treated this initially as if it was nothing more than a crazy, unhinged conspiracy theory.

Last month, President Biden asked the US intelligence community

to double down in answering this one question, where did COVID come from?

It's important to know the answer to that.

COVID is back in the news.

There's a new mutation of the Omicron variant.

Even talking about these things feels slightly peculiar, slightly out of time.

Though the virus has never left us, our collective gaze has seen permanently a scans pretty much for the last year or so.

Talk of mass mutations and mitigations all takes us back to a place that perhaps we just don't want to be.

But there is an even bigger question about COVID that for one reason or another has been least talked about of all.

It's about the origins of the virus itself.

Did COVID-19 start its life in a lab in Wuhan?

Was, in some sense, the Chinese state responsible?

And if it was, why, like the rest of us, are our governments looking the other way?

It's Lewis here. Welcome to the newsagents.

The newsagents.

To be specific, COVID-19...

That name gets further and further away from China, as opposed to calling it the Chinese virus.

By the way, it's a disease without question.

It has more names than any disease in history.

I can name Kung-Flu, I can name 19 different versions of them.

In the early days of the pandemic, the idea that this totalising global events had started at the hands of Chinese scientists was dismissed as crackpot fringe.

And that was not least because one of its primary adherents was the President of the United States.

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Those things wouldn't normally go hand in hand, but then again, it was Trump in office at the time. So everyone rolled their eyes, put it together with his other eminent thoughts on the subject like the virtues of injecting yourself with bleach.

But on this at least, he's not looking quite so fringe now.

Parts of the Biden administration, including the FBI and the Department of Energy, do believe now that the lab leak theory is the most likely explanation, though other parts of the government disagree.

The White House, having initially distanced itself from the idea, has said that it has an open mind and that includes the now retired Dr Tony Fauci, who again was initially very sceptical.

And the Republicans, the China Hawks in wider Washington, newly empowered in Congress, are keen to pursue it, starting their own investigation.

Welcome back to Red and Blue. I'm Weeja Jang.

The Department of Health and Human Services has released 900 pages of records to a GOP-led panel investigating the Biden administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The committee is specifically looking into whether the coronavirus originated in a lab in Wuhan, China,

whether the Chinese government covered up any wrongdoing, and if U.S. tax dollars helped fund the facility.

The panel's chairman, Republican-

Meanwhile, the British government has barely said a word on the subject.

Just to remind you, the lab leak theory is the idea that COVID may have escaped accidentally, or perhaps not accidentally, in some form or another, from a laboratory in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where, of course, the virus was first recorded.

Those who agree with it point to the not inconsiderable coincidence that just a few miles across the Yangtze River from the infamous wet market where the first cases were found lies the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a research institution that just so happens to have been studying coronavirus in bats for more than a decade.

Supporters also point out that no animal has ever been found, which has the COVID virus, no specimen zero, if you like.

Detractors point out that that was unlikely anyway, as the Chinese government ordered all of the produce in that wet market destroyed at the time, and there's really not much wider evidence to support the theory either.

Those who believe in the lab leak theory then say, well, how could there be?

The Chinese government has destroyed it all, and on and on it goes.

Politics and virology, not for the first time in COVID fusing.

A World Health Organization investigation, given limited access to the lab in 2021, was said to have generated more questions than answers with further investigations, stalled by the lack of cooperation from the Chinese.

The question remains deeply contested by scientists.

So we thought that given COVID is back in the news with this new mutation, we would ask, where are we and where COVID came from?

Will we ever know where it came from and why have relatively few seem to even ask the question?

So we turn first to Professor Callum Semple, Professor of Child Health and Outbreak Medicine at the University of Liverpool.

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He sits on stage, though, is talking to the news agents in a personal capacity, and we thought we'd start with where we are on this new mutation of the Omicron variant, which appears to be more infectious still.

It's really interesting how the virus is evolving and becoming stepwise just slightly more infectious. And that gives an advantage, and that's why a slightly more infectious virus becomes more dominant in the population.

It doesn't necessarily mean that the virus is more dangerous and it certainly doesn't mean that there needs to be a widespread concern about changing public health policy.

The key issue, does it cause more severe disease or does it infect and cause more disease in a different population?

And until we know that, then there's really no cause for alarm.

None of the previous mutations that we've seen in different variants that we've seen have actually caused more severe disease.

In fact, right from the start, we've seen a decline in disease severity.

I'm going to keep calm on this one.

Because we can't actually know about disease severity yet because it's still relatively new and we're still waiting to see what the data tells us.

That is true, but the trend so far has been that now that the vast majority of our population has been vaccinated or exposed,

the part of the immune system that protects you against severe disease, which is the T cell immunity,

it does appear that past infection, if you survive it and vaccination do induce sufficient immunity to protect you from severe disease.

And we've got no reason to believe that that's changed at the moment.

There has been some talk from some experts about the potential return of certain measures, including potentially masks in certain places.

I mean, could you envisage a scenario where we might go back there?

Society on the whole has moved away from wearing masks.

We've moved into the recovery phase.

The main benefit of masks was to actually prevent onward transmission rather than to protect the individual unless that individual is wearing an FFP3 mask.

So that's a long way of saying I don't think that we're going to be going back to mandated wearing of masks.

That said, if somebody wants to wear a mask, respect them.

If they want to protect themselves or if they may have an underlying respiratory illness that they don't want to share with other people,

I would ask why are they out in the public then, but they're wearing a mask.

They might not want to be spreading something.

Let's talk a little bit about going right back to the beginning and the origins of COVID.

Obviously, some time has now passed and more theories have emerged, more evidence on different sides of the ledger.

Could you just, in case anybody is not familiar with the different theories,

the two main theories are obviously the wet market theory and the lab leak theory.

Could you just briefly spell out what the two theories are?

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OK, so viruses live in nature in all kinds of environments.

And the Cervico viruses that give us the SARS coronavirus 2 that we now call COVID.

Most relatives of that virus are found quite commonly in lots of bats species.

The question is, did the virus come from a transmission from bats to an intermediate animal potentially or bats to a human?

And that caused the outbreak or actually option B,

which is was the virus collected by scientists with good intent who are working to develop vaccines and understand the viruses

and did it then leak from that laboratory?

And then slightly further to the fringe of that second theory as a sort of third theory,

where there are scientists deliberately manipulating a virus that they'd caught from the wild

and deliberately manipulating it to make it more infectious in humans so as to better understand its pandemic potential

and potentially that virus was the one that leaked into the population.

In a way, you've got a spectrum of from completely wild type virus through to lab leak and then lab leak of a sort of evil genius virus,

which is a view that's been treated quite seriously because you have to consider the worst possible options.

If you're doing an investigation, you've set out those three possibilities and the fact that there is a sort of spectrum of possibilities.

Where do you think the balance of evidence lies on that spectrum?

I think we're never ever going to be 100% sure.

And one thing we've learned from behavior in the pandemic is that people tend to get polarized views and then sit in one camp

and you'll never persuade them to change their views.

So my opinion and this respect is personal to me, but it is based on a broad experience of viruses and the way they cause outbreaks.

So first of all, we've probably got six or seven coronaviruses that have jumped from animal hosts into humans in the last 200 years.

And each time they've happened has been excess deaths.

And then eventually these viruses have become endemic.

So there's a really good track record of these events happening as part of nature.

So from that point of view, you don't really need a conspiracy of plan B or plan C.

It may just have happened naturally.

These viruses are out there.

And if you do go into the environments where they live and you have people going into mines, not taking precautions, not treating nature with respect, you will get spillover events.

If you look at the theory B and C, the lab leak theories,

when you grow viruses in culture, the viruses tend to stay in the bottle.

They don't jump out the bottle.

You handle the bottles of test tubes in biological safety cabinets with special airflow.

I find it very difficult to see how, unless there was gross negligence,

how a virus could actually escape, get into a human and then get into the community.

These events have happened in the past, but they're incredibly rare.

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So what's more likely?

And I think it's more likely that it was simply a wild type virus that jumped from bat to human, possibly through an intermediary that might have been the wet market or that area.

If you're putting numbers on it, I try to say, well, I'm 95% certain it was wild type.

I might go 4% on an accidental leak from a lab

and a 1% accidental leak from a lab of a gain of function virus if they were doing it.

But it matters, doesn't it? The genesis of this virus matters not only for scientific curiosity, but because it affects its humanity in such a totalizing way and it matters in terms of whether it happens again.

And yet there is certainly politically, at least,

perhaps not in the scientific community, but certainly politically,

a remarkable lack of curiosity considering how totalizing it was.

Yes, it does matter because we want to understand where it's come from

and could we actually prevent it happening in the past.

And that is very important that there's really rigorous scientific understanding of where these viruses come from and where they might come from next.

The good researchers are looking for these viruses,

looking for where the next jump might come from.

And if you know roughly the type of viruses involved,

you can then build a repertoire of potential solutions

which might just need to be tweaked to make a good vaccine in the end.

So we also need to know where it came from because if there is evidence

of lack of scientific integrity or lack of good laboratory practice,

you want to make sure that all the other laboratories in the world

that are doing this kind of work are taking the appropriate care.

Professor, really great for your time.

My pleasure.

Right, when we come back, we're going to be turning to the journalistic side of the ledger

with one man who has been following this story almost from the beginning

and he is much less skeptical of the lab leak theory.

Stay with us.

This is The News Agents.

Welcome back.

As we say, what's perhaps surprising about this is how little discussion in the media

and in politics, certainly in the UK anyway, there is about Covid's origins.

There hasn't been much sustained journalistic inquiry either.

But one team has been plugging away on it.

And that is the Sunday Times Insight Team, the pretty legendary group of investigative journalists on the paper.

They've had a string of stories on the subject over the past few years.

So we invited Jonathan Calver, editor of the Insight Team,

four times scoop of the year winner to talk about it with us.

So Jonathan, how long have you and the team at Insight

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been working on this story now?

And it might seem a silly question in a way, given the events which led up to it.

But what first got you interested in it?

I think we're kind of in the later stages of the first lockdown in May 2020 that we started working on it, because it obviously was a big question.

And I think the theory that it might have come from a laboratory in Wuhan was regarded very much as a bit of a conspiracy theory, that kind of thing.

It's fair to say, isn't it?

And you've alluded to this, that the idea or the credibility of the idea that this may have emerged from a lab, the lab, which is in Wuhan, has become augmented, has become more credible over time.

It started off as a rather fringe theory.

Why do you think it has started to become treated more credibly, particularly over the last year or so?

An awful lot of information has now come out, especially in America, in terms of freedom of information.

And one of the things that shows is that right at the very beginning in January 2020, a number of scientists got together and they wrote this seminal paper called The Proximal Origin, in which they said there was no chance that there was a lab leak.

And now we've seen all the freedom of information emails.

We can see that actually they're saying exactly the opposite privately to each other.

But they're trying to convince themselves that it's not because it would be so threatening to the whole of science, etc.

And then, of course, it got taken on by President Trump as anti-China bashing and said that when we first came to it, everyone was saying, well, it's got to be kind of a natural origin as opposed to a lab origin.

And the other thing that has happened over the last year has been that an awful lot of the freedom of information has come from America, where as a result of the fact that the Wuhan laboratory and some of its riskier experiments was being funded by the American government. As a result of that, there's quite a lot of information that was sent back to America.

And what that shows is that the Wuhan Institute was doing exactly the types of experiments which were called gain of function.

What they were doing was they were splicing together different viruses and seeing if they could become more potent.

And there's exactly the type of experiments that would have led to the creation of something like Covid-19.

Can you take us through the kind of broad outlines of the investigations that you and your team have been doing?

And the questions that it is now posing in terms of this theory and for China. What we concentrated on last in our last article was the type of work that was being done at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

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It all dates back to the SARS pandemic back in 2003. And as a result of that, the Wuhan Institute went out and collected thousands of viruses, took them back to Wuhan, and they had the biggest collection of coronaviruses in the world. They were trying to kind of replicate what might happen in nature in terms of if a bat passed on a virus to another virus, and then they mixed together and would they become more infectious to humans? And so they went to America for help and they got the help from a professor called Ralph Barrick. He created these humanized mice, which had human lungs and human respiratory system. So these mice had human organs or the equivalent of human organs within them. What the Wuhan Institute were doing was they were experimenting on all of those mice. And so if you go right to 2018, just a year before the pandemic started, they did one particular experiment in which they took the closest known match they'd found to SARS in the wild, and they mixed it with other coronaviruses they found there. And what they created was a kind of monster because it killed 75 percent of the mice that they injected into. It was three times as deadly as the original. And it was also 10,000 times as effective in the initial stages. You suddenly have a virus that would never have existed in nature, which had been created artificially. There have been a lot of concern internationally about this kind of game and function work, because what happens if you create something like this and it escapes? And that has happened before, of course, there have been other lab leaks in the past. Yeah, the Wuhan Institute, and this is all accepted, we're actually doing this work in very, very low state safety standards. A lot of it was BSL2, whereby it's kind of no more than a mask and a white coat and a pair of gloves. The ability for a researcher to be infected was huge. Obviously, one of the problems working on this story inevitably is going to be secrecy from the Chinese authorities and the Chinese state. Just how much information, if any at all, very much at all, are the Chinese and the Chinese government allowing people who are asking questions about it to have? Zero, I think. The Chinese are very, very, very keen not to talk about this at all. They have put forward this theory that COVID-19 emerged from frozen meat imported into China, which, of course, is not very plausible. What's quite sort of extraordinary about this is that there's really no investigation going on in China into what caused COVID-19.

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They don't want to know,
because as soon as they know, someone else could find out.
IEU intelligence assets, for example.
Yeah, quite possibly.
I mean, I just think that there's no upside to them knowing.
It all depends.
I mean, you know, the preponderance of evidence points towards a lab leak,
but it's still possible it could have come naturally.
But there's so much of a downside for China.
Just imagine if they already knew that.
And then then why would they be investigating?
There'd be no point in investigating, would they?
They already knew it was a lab leak.
But do you find it surprising that, OK, you can sort of understand
why the Chinese don't want to know?
But there aren't that many people necessarily even in the West.
The US has definitely become more interested in it.
But even journalistically, you're obviously plowing this furrow.
But considering that seven million people died around the world
and it transformed all of our lives, even now,
that there is so little interest, really, in the origin of this story.
Yeah, there is.
And it's quite, say, for example, the British government have done zero.
They have not taken any interest in at all.
It's more the Republicans in America because they kind of, I suppose,
it fits in with their kind of anti-China kind of stance.
Whereas whereas the Democrats are much more conciliatory,
which is why you see recently there was a kind of intelligence report
release, which very disappointing, was about four pages and said hardly anything.
And if anything, it just tried to minimize everything.
And the World Health Organization tried to have its own investigation,
but that they literally they went over there.
They were kind of walked around for two weeks and they saw nothing.
And they went into the I think they went into the Wuhan lab for a morning.
And later, the head of the investigation
revealed what a whitewash it had been.
And now they're not even allowed back into China.
So everything is stalled.
And that's a real shame because because I think what's important
about this is that if you think about the types of experiments
that were going on where new techniques have been applied
to creating new viruses to understand how viruses might change
and mutate in the wild, it's quite dangerous work.
And it people all over the world can do this type of work.

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And if it did leak from from the lab, then it's obviously quite important that that we know that and that precautions are taken in future to either kind of make sure that this work is done in much, much safer conditions or maybe maybe stopped entirely.

I mean, for example, under the Obama administration, 2014 to 2016, they had a complete moratorium on gain of function research.

So it's vitally important.

We do know. But do you think we'll ever know for sure?

That's the difficulty.

The difficulty is that clearly the answer lies in China and China is not being helpful in this respect in any way at all.

In fact, it's being obstructive, if anything.

So I think there's a good likelihood that we will never know.

Jonathan, absolutely pleasure to talk to you.

Thanks so much. OK, thank you.

Thank you.

Look, as we were saying there, we might never know where covid began.

The evidence might not exist and it might never have existed.

And as I think we always try and do, it makes sense to go with where scientific opinion is, which at the moment still probably leans to the wet market theory.

But what I find fascinating, as I say, is how little we're talking about it.

Some people say it doesn't matter.

What matters is that we're ready for the next one, how governments dealt with covid when it happened, what we can learn from that.

But that is a pretty jaundiced way of looking at it.

First of all, as we've said, it matters because it has implications for what we do in the future.

But also nearly seven million people died.

It was a totalizing event, shattering so much of human existence, literally and figuratively.

Think of the resources the state spends investigating the death of just one person entirely rightly.

There is a matter of justice here for all those people who died and those who love them to have a better idea as to why it happened.

But this, as always with covid, is where politics and science collide.

And it isn't easy always to see how things really are.

We'll be back just after this.

This is the news agents.

Right, that is it from all of us this week.

Now, John and Emily weren't here this weekend.

They're on the red eye straight to Sydney for this Sunday's World Cup final.

Frankly, when they found out that the heir to the throne, Prince William, wasn't going, they did the only thing they could do, which was to step into the breach.

Honestly, will you make a grip and get on a flight?

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What else are you going to be doing?

Opening an Aldi somewhere, suit yourself out, son.

Remember, you can catch up on all our shows from this week on Global Player and send us story tips and feedback to newsagentsatglobal.com.

Remember to check out this week's news agents, USA episode.

John was all on his own, so go and give him some company.

Thanks to our production team on the news agents, Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett and Rory Simon.

Our editor is Tom Hughes.

It's presented by Emily, the ultimate lioness, mate list.

John Blabbermouth can't help but share wedding stories.

Soaple and me, Lewis Goodall.

We'll see you all on Monday.

Have a lovely weekend.

Go England.

This has been a Global Player original podcast and a Persephoneka production.