WHO Goes PC In Renaming Wuhan Virus

By Josh Bloom — February 13, 2020

The World Health Organization has decided to give the Wuhan virus two names, both nebulous so that no person, animal or culture gets offended. Perhaps WHO is passing the sensitivity test but it is also flunking the sensibility test. Here’s why.

"We now have a name for the disease and it's COVID-19... the name had been chosen to avoid references to a specific geographical location, animal species or group of people in line with international recommendations for naming aimed at preventing stigmatisation."

World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

Please forgive me if I skip the celebration.

A very scary new virus is making a possibly-unprecedented run around the world and Ghebreyesus is worried about stigmatizing a bat (1), the people who ate it, and the city where it all began. Well, that's just too bad. I will still call it the Wuhan coronavirus (and I suspect others will too) because it is perfectly accurate.

We know exactly where the outbreak began and (very likely) why. I would argue that pretending
otherwise by sugarcoating the name is obfuscating and counterproductive, especially given the wild and conflicting headlines that we see hourly. Perhaps a good dose of "accurate" isn't such a bad idea.

Yet, the official name of the virus is now SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes is called COVID-19. To non-scientists neither of these names means anything, and the fact that the virus and the disease have different names can only serve to further confuse the public.

But the term "Wuhan virus" means plenty. Making the world "forget" the origin of the epidemic may pass the sensitivity test but it fails the sensibility test. Why?

First, a comprehensible and accurate name might provide a little incentive for countries and their citizens to pay a little more attention to public health and less to the "culture" of eating bats, rhino horns, and tiger penises (2,3,4). The virus came from Wuhan, not Cleveland. Facts count.

Second, it is an environmental abomination to kill endangered animals in the name of fictional medicinal claims, traditional or otherwise, or status. Nor is it such a hot idea to eat animals that are known to harbor viruses that are harmful to humans simply for culinary gratification. Perhaps a little stigma isn't so awful here.

But the WHO seems to think that the absence of stigmatization counts, and maybe just as much. From the World Health Organization Best Practices for the Naming of New Human Infectious Diseases [2] (emphasis mine):

The World Health Organization (WHO), in consultation and collaboration with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), has identified best practices for the naming of new human diseases, with the aim to minimize unnecessary negative impact of disease names on trade, travel, tourism or animal welfare, and avoid causing offence to any cultural, social, national, regional, professional or ethnic groups.

WHO, May 2015

In other words, sugarcoat the name to avoid offending any person (or animal). But, this is a terrible idea. People should not be lulled into forgetting where, and how this virus arose. They should be reminded constantly and maybe there won't be SARS-CoV-3/COVID-20 as soon.

But if the WHO makes human health policy according to advice from the World Organization for Animal Health you better stock up on masks.

I didn’t get a vote on what was on the menu halfway across the world and they don’t get a vote in what I call the virus. If you’re offended by this, too bad, This is not the time to be sensitive.

NOTES:

(1) Initial reports identified bats as the source of the virus. It is still a working theory. But
pangolins - something that I will cheerfully keep out of my diet - have been implicated as the original source and with the bats being carriers. It may take some time to arrive at a definite conclusion.

A pangolin. No thank you. Photo: CBS News [3]

(2) Bats are eaten as a delicacy in some cultures, including some parts of China. Wherever it's eaten, it's a bad idea. Even Science Magazine called this 17 years ago, although for a different reason. See: Don't Eat the Bats [4], Science, 2003.

(3) All five species of rhinos are critically endangered and for no good reason. According to a 2010 article [5] in Nature: " In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the horn, which is shaved or ground into a powder and dissolved in boiling water, is used to treat fever, rheumatism, gout, and other disorders. According to the 16th-century Chinese pharmacist Li Shi Chen, the horn could also cure snakebites, hallucinations, typhoid, headaches, carbuncles, vomiting, food poisoning, and “devil possession.” (However, it is not, as commonly believed, prescribed as an aphrodisiac)."

(4) "The tiger’s penis is particularly prized as an aphrodisiac, and is commonly prepared by soaking the dried member in water and then simmering it with herbal ingredients." See China Outlaws the Eating of Tiger Penis, Rhino Horn, and Other Endangered Animal Products, Vox, 2014 [6].