The bird is the word. But should we censor it?

By ACSH Staff — December 21, 2011

Two separate research groups have reportedly [1] developed strains of bird flu (avian influenza type A [H5N1]) that may be transmissible between humans. However, just as the studies were set to appear in the journals *Nature* and *Science*, the U.S. National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) asked that the journals omit key research data from the publication. The NSABB, an independent expert committee that advises various federal agencies, would like to prevent the new research from falling into the wrong hands. However, the editorial boards of both journals have yet to agree to the request; both initially objected on the grounds that such a redaction would restrict access to information that is valuable to public health, while other researchers likened such a move to government-imposed censorship of science.

Thus far, the deadly H5N1 avian flu has been transmitted only from infected birds to humans; it does not spread from one person to another. Now, though, two laboratories one at the University of Wisconsin and another at the Erasmus Medical Center in Rotterdam have produced a genetic mutation that allows the virus to be easily transmitted between ferrets, a reliable model for human transmission. The existence of this strain raises the possibility that the mutated virus could result in a potentially catastrophic epidemic. Given its mortality rate of over 50 percent as compared to 0.1 percent for common flu an avian flu epidemic could cause millions of deaths.

The new research is, of course, double-edged: Study of the mutated virus could be useful in developing a vaccine, but, as the NSABB fears, it also has the potential to be used to create a biological weapon. With these risks and benefits in mind, the National Institutes of Health has stated that the government is working on a system that would allow secure access to researchers with a legitimate reason to see the new data on mutations and the relevant scientific methods.

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross observes that, although this government request is unprecedented, the concerns sound valid. While the experimental data contain potentially dangerous information," he says, "the redacted details might also be valuable to the research community. Therefore, the government should institute a mechanism that allows only accredited scientists to access the information.