

Scientists make controversial H7N9 proposal

08 August 2013 | News | By BioSpectrum Bureau



Singapore: A leading group of influenza scientists have proposed to conduct a highly controversial 'gain-of-function' bird flu research that has already generated some harsh criticism.

Furthermore, a recently published [study in the British Medical Journal \(BMJ\)](#), revealed that the world's first human-to-human avian influenza transmission might have taken place. A Chinese father is suspected to have transmitted the novel avian influenza A (H7N9) virus to his daughter who had tended to him during the illness in early March 2013

The proposed research would revolve around the latest deadly strain of avian influenza (H7N9 bird flu) that sent ripples of fear in China earlier this year. This strain of influenza virus, H7N9 has so far infected 134 humans, out of which 43 lost their lives. In July this year, the World Health Organization (WHO) had said that there have been 633 known cases of H5N1 flu and 377 of the cases have died from the infection.

In a letter first published in leading science journals, the group has outlined the types of studies it believes should be conducted. Only a year back the H5N1 gain-of-function controversy caused a raging debate in the scientists' circle, some of who highlighted the grave dangers associated with such kind of research.

One of the authors, Dutch virologist Ron Fouchier has explained that the idea behind the letter is for researchers to be transparent about what they plan to do in the hope of fending off some of the concerns that emerged in the H5N1 controversy.

A gain-of-function research involves adding mutations of a virus to see if it can gain features it doesn't currently have, such as the ability to resist flu drugs or spread easily from person to person. Such a research is aimed at identifying changes that would give a virus these capacities so that public health laboratories could be on the lookout for viruses with these changes that emerge in nature.

Many scientists from across the globe have argued that such kind of work is too dangerous and should not be undertaken. Critics have argued that at the time of the H5N1 gain-of-function controversy, that the exact mutations used to push the

viruses to become more transmissible among mammals should not be published because they could serve as a blueprint for making bird-flu viruses that can spread, like seasonal flu viruses, from person to person.

The report said that the letter was signed by a group of influenza scientists who do research funded by the US government.