

COMMENTARY

# The Covid Lab-Leak Deception

## Scientists who signed a paper claiming a natural origin turn out not to have believed it themselves.

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By Matt Ridley and Alina Chan

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The controversy over the origins of Covid-19 refuses to die, despite efforts early in the pandemic to kill it. It was natural to doubt it was a coincidence that an outbreak caused by a SARS-like coronavirus from bats began in Wuhan, China, the only city where risky experiments were being done on diverse and novel SARS-like coronaviruses from bats. The Chinese Communist Party did its utmost to dismiss such suspicions, but so did a group of influential Western scientists.

On March 17, 2020, the journal *Nature Medicine* published a paper by five scientists, “[The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2](#),” that dismissed “any type of laboratory based scenario” for the origin of the pandemic. It was cited by thousands of news outlets to claim that the virus emerged naturally. But [Slack messages and emails](#) subpoenaed and released by the House Oversight Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic suggest that some of the authors didn’t believe their own conclusions. Before, during and even after the publication of their paper, they worried privately that Covid-19 was caused by a laboratory escape, perhaps even of a genetically engineered virus.

The lead author, evolutionary biologist Kristian Andersen of the Scripps Institution, told the journal’s chief editor, João Monteiro, that he would edit the paper “to make clearer that this [virus] *does* have a natural origin” (emphasis in original). The paper stated boldly: “Our analyses clearly show that SARS-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus.”

Shortly after publication, Francis Collins, then director of the National Institutes of Health, wrote on the NIH website that “this study leaves little room to refute a natural origin for COVID-19.” Anthony Fauci, then director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease, said from the podium of the White House that the paper showed that the data were “totally consistent with a jump of a species from an animal to a human.” In private, the authors celebrated the traction their paper was gaining despite angry emails from the public. “We RUUUUUULE. That’s tenure secured, right there,” Mr. Andersen wrote.

The mainstream media frequently cited the paper in ridiculing any discussion of a lab leak as a conspiracy theory favored by racists and right-wing extremists. [Facebook](#) censored the topic for a year. Yet now the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Energy Department—the U.S. intelligence agencies with the strongest scientific expertise—have assessed that the pandemic likely had a research-related origin.

Mr. Andersen’s messages confirm that senior scientists who controlled the purse strings of large funding bodies prompted them to draft the paper after a conference call on Feb. 1, 2020.

They were Dr. Fauci, Dr. Collins and Jeremy Farrar of the Wellcome Trust. Shortly before their paper went public, evolutionary biologist and virologist Edward Holmes of Sydney University reported to his fellow authors that “Jeremy Farrar and Francis Collins are very happy” with the final draft. Two of the authors wrote in private messages that they had rushed their paper out under pressure from unidentified “higher-ups.” The role of these senior scientists went unacknowledged in the paper.

When asked at a July 11 subcommittee hearing—before the latest release of messages—about the contrast between their public and private opinions, one of the authors, virologist Robert Garry of Tulane University, replied: “I was doing what scientists often do, and that is take a devil’s advocate position.” Mr. Andersen said that changing your mind in the light of new evidence “is simply the scientific process.”

Yet the newly revealed messages show that the scientists didn’t change their minds. They continued to advocate privately for the devil even after a preliminary version of the paper went online on Feb. 16, 2020. On Feb. 20, Mr. Andersen wrote to an editor at Nature (which was offered the paper first but passed it to Nature Medicine) that new data from pangolins didn’t help refute a lab origin, adding that “we all really, really wish that we could do that (that’s how this got started), but unfortunately it’s just not possible given the data.” Another author, evolutionary biologist Andrew Rambaut of Edinburgh University, wrote: “I literally swivel day by day thinking it is a lab escape or natural.”

On April 16, a month after publication, Mr. Andersen wrote that “I’m still not fully convinced that no culture was involved” and “we also can’t fully rule out engineering”—i.e., that the virus not only was released from the lab but had been genetically manipulated there. He worried about the Wuhan lab’s research on live SARS-like viruses from bats at low biosafety levels: “it’s definitely concerning work, no question about it.”

So why did they publish a paper denying that laboratory origin was plausible? The answer may lie in their messages. In early February 2020, Mr. Rambaut wrote: “Given the s— show that would happen if anyone serious accused the Chinese of even accidental release, my feeling is we should say that given there is no evidence of a specifically engineered virus, we cannot possibly distinguish between natural evolution and escape so we are content to ascribing it to natural processes.”

Mr. Andersen replied: “I totally agree that that’s a very reasonable conclusion. Although I hate when politics is injected into science—but it’s impossible not to.” On Feb. 19, the group became aware that Mr. Farrar had signed a public letter in the Lancet “to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.”

To adjust the conclusions in a scientific paper for political reasons isn’t part of the scientific process. The world was misled with serious consequences. If experts hadn’t shut down the rational possibility of a laboratory origin of Covid-19, a credible investigation might have taken place (it still has not), the World Health Organization might not have taken Chinese government assurances at face value, and governments might have done more to detect and deter laboratory-based outbreaks in the future.

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