

Swine Flu may have Escaped from a Laboratory

WHO Probes Claim

By [Global Research](#)

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Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#), [Science and Medicine](#)

In-depth Report: [THE H1N1 SWINE FLU PANDEMIC](#)

Commentary by Washington's Blog

Adrian Gibbs isn't a wild-eyed youth. He was one of the researchers whose work was instrumental in the creation of the flu drugs Tamiflu and Relenza, and he has written or co-authored more than 250 scientific publications on viruses during his 39-year career at the Australian National University in Canberra.

The fact that Gibbs is [saying that the swine flu may have escaped from a lab](#) is causing the CDC and other health organizations to investigate his claim. They aren't buying it at this point, but they are looking into it.

Such speculation is not entirely new. As National Public Radio [noted](#) that Professor John Oxford at St. Bart's and the Royal London Hospital says that the 1957 H1N1 pandemic probably started when it escaped from a lab:

"We reckon now, in retrospect, it was probably released accidentally from a laboratory, probably in northern China or just across the border in Russia, because everyone was experimenting with those viruses at the time in the lab." It was nothing malicious, Oxford believes, just some flu vaccine research that broke out of containment.

Similarly, Bloomberg [notes](#):

Some scientists have speculated that the 1977 Russian flu, the most recent global outbreak, began when a virus escaped from a laboratory.

Source:

<http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2009/05/health-organizations-checking-top-virus.html>

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Swine Flu May Be Human Error, Scientist Says; WHO Probes Claim

By Jason Gale and Simeon Bennett

May 12 (Bloomberg) — The World Health Organization is investigating an Australian researcher's claim that the swine flu virus circling the globe may have been created as a

result of human error.

[Adrian Gibbs](#), 75, who collaborated on research that led to the development of Roche Holding AG's Tamiflu drug, said in an interview today that he intends to publish a report suggesting the new strain may have accidentally evolved in eggs scientists use to grow viruses and drugmakers use to make vaccines. Gibbs said that he came to his conclusion as part of an effort to trace the virus's origins by analyzing its genetic blueprint.

The World Health Organization received the study last weekend and is reviewing it, [Keiji Fukuda](#), the agency's assistant director-general of health security and environment, said in an interview yesterday. Gibbs, who has studied germ evolution for four decades, is one of the first scientists to analyze the genetic makeup of the virus that was identified three weeks ago in Mexico and threatens to touch off the first [flu pandemic](#) since 1968.

A virus that resulted from lab experimentation or vaccine production may indicate a greater need for security, Fukuda said. By pinpointing the source of the virus, scientists also may better understand the microbe's potential for spreading and causing illness, Gibbs said.

Caution

"The sooner we get to grips with where it's come from, the safer things might become," Gibbs said in a telephone interview from Canberra today. "It could be a mistake" that occurred at a vaccine production facility or the virus could have jumped from a pig to another mammal or a bird before reaching humans, he said.

Gibbs and two colleagues analyzed the publicly available sequences of hundreds of amino acids coded by each of the flu virus's eight genes. He said he aims to submit his three-page paper tomorrow for publication in a medical journal.

"You really want a very sober assessment" of the science behind the claim, Fukuda said yesterday at the WHO's Geneva headquarters.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta has received the report and has decided there is no evidence to support Gibbs's conclusion, said Nancy Cox, director of the agency's influenza division. She said since researchers don't have samples of swine flu viruses from South America and Africa, where the new strain may have evolved, those regions can't be ruled out as natural sources for the new flu.

No Evidence

"We are interested in the origins of this new influenza virus," she said. "But contrary to what the author has found, when we do the comparisons that are most relevant, there is no evidence that this virus was derived by passage in eggs."

The WHO's collaborative influenza research centers, which includes the CDC, and sites in Memphis, Melbourne, London and Tokyo, were asked by the international health agency to review the study over the weekend, Fukuda said. The request was extended to scientists at the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) in Rome, the [World Organization for Animal Health](#) in Paris, as well as the WHO's influenza network yesterday, he said.

"My guess is that the picture should be a lot clearer over the next few days," Fukuda said.

“We have asked a lot of people to look at this.”

Lab Escape

Gibbs wrote or co-authored more than 250 scientific publications on viruses during his 39-year career at the Australian National University in Canberra, according to [biographical information](#) on the university’s Web site.

Swine flu has infected 5,251 people in 30 countries so far, killing 61. Scientists are trying to determine whether the virus will mutate and become more deadly if it spreads to the Southern Hemisphere and back. Flu [pandemics](#) occur when a strain of the disease to which few people have immunity evolves and spreads.

Gibbs said his analysis supports research by scientists including [Richard Webby](#), a virologist at [St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital](#) in Memphis, who found the new strain is the product of two distinct lineages of influenza that have circulated among swine in North America and Europe for more than a decade.

In addition, his research found the rate of genetic mutation in the new virus outpaced that of the most closely related viruses found in pigs, suggesting it evolved outside of swine, Gibbs said.

Some scientists have speculated that the 1977 Russian flu, the most recent global outbreak, began when a virus escaped from a laboratory.

Other Theories?

Identifying the source of new flu viruses is difficult without finding the exact strain in an animal or bird “reservoir,” said [Jennifer McKimm-Breschkin](#), a virologist at the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organization in Melbourne.

“If you can’t find an exact match, the best you can do is compare sequences,” she said. “Similarities may give an indication of a possible source, but this remains theoretical.”

The World Organization for Animal Health, which represents chief veterinary officers from 174 countries, received the Gibbs paper and is working with WHO on an assessment, said [Maria Zampaglione](#), a spokeswoman.

The WHO wants to know whether any evidence that the virus may have been developed in a laboratory can be corroborated and whether there are other explanations for its particular genetic patterns, according to Fukuda.

‘Wild Idea’

“These things have to be dealt with straight on,” he said. “If someone makes a hypothesis, then you test it and you let scientific process take its course.”

Gibbs said he has no evidence that the swine-derived virus was a deliberate, man-made product.

“I don’t think it could be a malignant thing,” he said. “It’s much more likely that some random thing has put these two viruses together.”

Gibbs, who spent most of his academic career studying plant viruses, said his major contribution to the study of influenza occurred in 1975, while collaborating with scientists [Graeme Laver](#) and [Robert Webster](#) in [research that led to the development of the anti-flu medicines](#) Tamiflu and Relenza, made by GlaxoSmithKline Plc.

“We were out on one of the Barrier Reef islands, off Australia, catching birds for the flu in them, and I happened to be the guy who caught the best,” Gibbs said. The bird he got “yielded the poo from which was isolated the influenza isolate strain from which all the work on Tamiflu and Relenza started.”

Gibbs, who says he studies the evolution of flu viruses as a “retirement hobby,” expects his research to be challenged by other scientists.

“This is how science progresses,” he said. “Somebody comes up with a wild idea, and then they all pounce on it and kick you to death, and then you start off on another silly idea.”

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