

INTERNATIONAL
Herald Tribune

Influenza scientists, WHO face off in virus row

The Associated Press

Friday, October 3, 2008

JAKARTA, Indonesia: It's a David and Goliath battle that could affect the world's ability to monitor diseases and develop lifesaving vaccines. The key issue: Should Indonesia and other developing nations have a say over crucial genetic data about their own deadly viruses?

An international network of top influenza scientists says yes, arguing that is the best way to speed development and research, but they are running into resistance from within the World Health Organization, which opposes letting countries keep intellectual property rights to virus samples they provide for research.

The intensifying standoff was triggered in part by revelations that the WHO, for years looked upon as the protector of the poor, had been keeping coveted information about bird flu and other viruses in a private database in Los Alamos, New Mexico, and making it available to just 15 laboratories.

Some foreign governments called for a boycott of the global body's 55-year-old virus-sharing system, which had obliged them to freely hand over samples and data.

The problem with that system, they say, is that developing countries give up intellectual property rights to their virus samples when they provide them to the WHO. The virus samples are then used by private pharmaceutical companies to make vaccines that are awarded patents and sold at a profit at prices many poor nations can't afford.

Acknowledging a need for change, the WHO agreed to work with developing nations to make sure they had better access to lifesaving medicine, an intensely bureaucratic process that is about to enter its second year with no clear end in site.

In the meantime, leading influenza scientists and health experts came up with their own solution to alleviate the basic concerns of transparency for developing nations, one that appears to be making some at the WHO nervous.

The scientists' nonprofit organization, which goes by the name of GISAID, launched a publicly accessible online database that for the first time ever offers basic intellectual property rights to those who submit genetic information.

That has encouraged many countries including Indonesia, China, Russia and others to again start sharing information about their viruses, turning GISAID into the world's largest and most comprehensive influenza database in just four months.

"I'm in favor of what works. If nothing is working, we have to come up with something new," said Bruce Lehman, who served as Commissioner of Patents and Trademarks under U.S. President Bill Clinton.

"And if you have a mechanism that is going to encourage the dissemination of scientific data, of research, well, then that is going to be positive in terms of coming up with new treatments for disease."

However, the WHO appears to be going to extreme lengths to stand in GISAID's way, including

withholding funding that has been pledged for the database.

The World Health Organization, meanwhile, is seeking US\$10 million for its own database and virus tracking system, even though its own scientists are already using GISAID's free-of-charge site almost exclusively, including for last month's virus strain selection for the annual flu shot, said Masato Tashiro, director of WHO's collaborating center at Japan's National Institute of Infectious Diseases.

Because many scientists played a key role in helping design the system to meet their needs, they are befuddled at the WHO Secretariat's refusal to embrace them.

David Heymann, the global body's top flu official, said the reason was simple.

For the first time in decades, developing countries are looking at the global body with mistrust, and officials cannot afford to be partial to any group, he said, adding this was a direct order from WHO Director-General Margaret Chan.

Heymann supports keeping viruses in the public domain something that effectively strips countries of ownership rights and, until recently, other top officials in Geneva maintained it was important some genetic data remained behind closed doors.

In the most recent dispute over GISAID's free database, the WHO has refused to hand over US\$450,000 provided by the U.S. Centers of Disease Control for the database's development well over a year ago.

That is a lot of money for the feisty group of influenza scientists, given that their director, Peter Bogner, a former television broadcaster who rallied to their cause two years ago, has largely financed the initiative on his own.

"We are working with WHO to get these funds mobilized for their intended purposes," said Bill Hall, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, also frustrated after receiving conflicting reasons for the delay.

The WHO's Heymann said CDC money had been earmarked for a specific project a database but not a particular organization.

"We have to go through a competitive bidding process," he told AP a process in which GISAID would be ineligible to compete because it is a nonprofit organization.

Developing nations, which have a key stake in the project, meanwhile alleged that a WHO-commissioned report comparing five databanks, from GenBank to Los Alamos, carried out by the global body's four collaborating centers was deliberately kept secret.

Scientists ranked GISAID superior on almost all levels, from the amount and type of information included to functionality, but several member states said, when requesting an update, they were told no assessment had been carried out.

Indonesian Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari said Friday if the goal was to force members states to use an expensive and substandard database and tracking system created by WHO, it wouldn't work.

"It would certainly add the lingering mistrust many feel toward WHO," she said.

On the Net:

<http://gisaid.org/>

Correction:

Notes:



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