Biosecurity and Censorship: the H5N1 Influenza Controversy

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In this issue of The Journal of Infectious Diseases (JID), 3 short articles by leaders in influenza virus research and/or biosecurity discuss current controversies regarding experiments with bioengineered H5N1 influenza virus. Sander Herfst and colleagues, the creators of an H5N1 virus strain with increased transmission among ferrets, present their case for freedom of expression unhindered by excessive editorial censorship. Nicole Bouvier, an influenza researcher not directly involved in the experiments on increased transmissibility, discusses how censorship may have potentially chilling effects on future scientific investigation without necessarily improving our security. Finally, Michael Osterholm and David Relman, members of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB), provide a historical perspective of the issues raised and propose how to move forward in a fashion that benefits society and minimizes the risk of catastrophic consequences.

JID is deeply interested in freedom of scientific expression, as well as the risks involved in this type of research, and has closely followed the issues raised as the NSABB, the World Health Organization, involved scientists, and others wrestle with the proper balance among scientific freedom, censorship, individual safety, and national security. We are well aware that JID may face similar issues as manuscripts dealing with potentially dangerous pathogens are submitted. Together with the Infectious Diseases Society of America leadership and the editorial board of our sister journal, Clinical Infectious Diseases, the JID editorial board is developing policies that address these issues on a case-by-case basis, so that freedom of scientific expression can be maintained without sacrificing individual safety or national security. We hope that the Perspective articles in the current issue contribute to the dialogue necessary to solve these thorny issues.

Note
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