



Statement by
Science Editor-in-Chief Dr. Bruce Alberts
Regarding Publication of H5N1 Avian Influenza Research
December 20, 2011

Editors at the journal *Science* are taking very seriously a request by the U.S. National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity (NSABB) to publish only an abbreviated version of a research report related to a strain of H5N1 avian influenza virus. Specifically, the NSABB on November 30 verbally asked *Science* to delete details regarding both scientific methodology and specific viral mutations before publishing a research article by Dr. Ron Fouchier of the Erasmus Medical Center and colleagues. The written recommendation was provided to us on December 1.

As Dr. Fouchier had explained at a scientific conference in September and subsequently to journalists who were covering that event, his research describes genetic changes that allow the virus to be easily transmitted between ferrets. (Reference: <http://news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2011/11/scientists-brace-for-media-storm.html>.)

The resulting virus is sensitive to antivirals and to certain vaccine candidates and knowledge about it could well be essential for speeding the development of new treatments to combat this lethal form of influenza. The NSABB has emphasized the need to prevent the details of the research from falling into the wrong hands. We strongly support the work of the NSABB and the importance of its mission for advancing science to serve society. At the same time, however, *Science* has concerns about withholding potentially important public-health information from responsible influenza researchers. Many scientists within the influenza community have a bona fide need to know the details of this research in order to protect the public, especially if they currently are working with related strains of the virus.

Science editors will be evaluating how best to proceed. Our response will be heavily dependent upon the further steps taken by the U.S. government to set forth a written, transparent plan to ensure that any information that is omitted from the publication will be provided to all those responsible scientists who request it, as part of their legitimate efforts to improve public health and safety.

Science supports the 2003 joint Statement on Scientific Publication and Security, published in *Science*, *Nature* and *PNAS*. The statement notes that "open publication brings benefits not only to public health but also to efforts to combat terrorism." It further emphasizes the need to publish "manuscripts of high quality, in sufficient detail to permit reproducibility," and it recognizes that there may be occasions when a paper "should be modified, or not be published." (Reference: <http://www.sciencemag.org/site/feature/data/security/statement.pdf>.)

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