**Who Are the Covid Investigators?**

By: The Editorial Board

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The world needs to learn all it can about the origins of the novel coronarivus, and the World Health Organization has been investigating. But there’s increasing reason to question the effort due to China’s lack of cooperation and conflicts of interest on the WHO team.

A Beijing-approved WHO delegation recently concluded a 12-day visit to Wuhan, where the virus emerged more than a year ago. The group visited local hospitals and sites like the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and Huanan Seafood Market. But such field trips aren’t very helpful without unhindered access to raw data. The Chinese government, which controls research into Covid-19’s origin, has limited WHO access to such information.

Chinese officials are spinning that Covid-19 came from outside China. Some Communist Party functionaries have suggested the virus was imported through frozen food, but few scientists take the idea seriously. Many believe it arrived through “zoonotic spillover,” passing perhaps from bats, through another species, to humans. Another theory is that the virus came from a laboratory such as the one in Wuhan.

The WIV has conducted controversial “gain of function” research on coronaviruses. Such experiments can provide viruses with new capabilities—such as the ability to infect a different species. The U.S. State Department has said “several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019” and had “symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses.” This is important to investigate.

Yet the recent WHO trip ended with a propaganda coup for Beijing. Peter Ben Embarek, head of the WHO team, declared the lab hypothesis “extremely unlikely” and “not in the hypotheses that we will suggest for future studies.” Mr. Embarek said he had spoken with lab personnel extensively, and “they’re the best ones to dismiss the claims.” But apparently the frozen-food theory was worth looking into.

This was too much even for WHO director-general Tedros Ghebreyesus. “The expert team is still working on its final report,” he clarified last week. “All hypotheses remain open and require further study.” But who ensures that?

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One prominent member of the WHO team is zoologist Peter Daszak. Also part of the Lancet COVID-19 Commission, Mr. Daszak has vowed to investigate “with an open mind” and “not be bound by preconceived ideas.”

Yet emails obtained by the nonprofit U.S. Right to Know show that Mr. Daszak long ago made up his mind about the lab-leak theory. In February 2020, he helped organize a statement in the Lancet condemning “conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.” In one email, Mr. Daszak wrote that the document should “not be identifiable as coming from any one organization or person.” But EcoHealth Alliance, the global nonprofit he leads, played an outsize role.

His interest is understandable. The British-born U.S. citizen has deep ties with the WIV. Millions of U.S. government dollars went to his organization to fund research at the Chinese institution. Mr. Daszak, who has consistently defended the Chinese government, didn’t respond to a request for comment.

“You’re looking for small clusters of outbreaks that went to a clinic because they were severe and their symptoms were just like Covid,” Mr. Daszak said during a CNN interview from Wuhan earlier this month. “That didn’t happen. We didn’t see that in the data earlier than December.” Never mind that Washington said it found exactly that at the WIV.

While Mr. Daszak touted the “really remarkable openness from China,” other experts from the WHO committee complained about political pressure and uncooperative hosts blocking access to important data. The Australian team member Dominic Dwyer in particular deserves credit for speaking candidly.

Also of concern is Marion Koopmans, who oversees the viroscience department at the Erasmus University Medical Center in Rotterdam, Netherlands. A decade ago Ms. Koopmans’s deputy, Ron Fouchier, made international news by modifying a deadly flu virus to spread between ferrets. If an investigation finds it likely that the Covid-19 pandemic was caused by gain-of-function research, that would have repercussions for labs around the world, including at Erasmus MC. A spokesman for the organization didn’t respond to a request for comment.

A WHO spokesman told us that “we wanted to ensure a well-represented international team with geographic and topic area expertise balance.” That makes sense, and such a team would consult scientists like Ms. Koopmans and Mr. Daszak. But their critical role as investigators undermines confidence in the probe.

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Donald Trump’s criticism of WHO was often dismissed as politically self-interested, but the inquiry has unnerved the organization’s supporters as well. “We have deep concerns about the way in which the early findings of the COVID-19 investigation were communicated and questions about the process used to reach them,” U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in a Saturday statement. Deep concerns? Such as?

“Please don’t rely too much on US intel: increasingly disengaged under Trump & frankly wrong on many aspects,” Mr. Daszak tweeted last week. Making as much of the intelligence as possible available, and vocally and clearly raising U.S. concerns, is the best way for the White House to respond to this spin from China and its apologists.