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# How scientists misled the world about Covid's origins

The suppression of the lab-leak theory is the mother of all Covid scandals.



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23rd March 2025

Topics **COVID-19** **SCIENCE & TECH** **WORLD**

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Five years ago today, based on a highly misleading 'model' forecast from one academic, Neil Ferguson, the British government ditched its pandemic plan and locked the entire country down. This decision had disastrous and – as Sweden proves – unnecessary consequences.

It was the first of many dreadful mistakes made by the government during the Covid pandemic: shutting schools at the behest of unions, assuming the virus was not airborne, vaccinating children, overclaiming for vaccines and masks. The government thought it knew best and it let us down.

But all those errors pale beside the biggest one of the lot, and the one that has done most to undermine trust in scientists – that is, the initial insistence that the virus did not originate in a laboratory accident. We now know that it almost certainly did. The evidence is overwhelming, as I have rehearsed many times. And it now includes a huge stack of documents – inadvertently made public and spotted by two open-source investigators, 'Billy Bostickson' and Gilles Demaneuf – that shows just how systematically we were deceived about this mother of all scandals.

Let me place you inside a taxi travelling to Geneva airport on 12 February 2020. Inside the cab are two people. One is Dr Peter Daszak, the \$400,000-a-year head of the EcoHealth Alliance, an organisation that boasted about funneling millions of dollars to the Wuhan Institute of Virology to harvest wild bat viruses and do risky experiments on them. He and his organisation would later be debarred from federal funding by the Biden administration for failing to divulge vital information about EcoHealth's support for suspiciously risky gain-of-function experiments on close relatives of the virus that caused Covid.

The other is Dr (now Sir) Jeremy Farrar, the then head of the Wellcome Trust, the world's largest charitable funder of scientific research, and now head of science at the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Farrar sent an email at 9.34am that day to: Daszak; Michael Ryan of the WHO, the person who hotly denied that the virus was airborne; Christian Drosten, a German virologist; and Bernhard Schwartländer, a former Beijing-based scientist with a tendency to fawn over the pronouncements of Xi Jinping and now former chief of staff to the Beijing-backed head of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The email read:

*'Got a taxi to airport and on flight with Peter. I hope there is a paper / letter ready this week to go to Nature (and WHO) which effectively puts to bed the issue of the origin of the virus. I do think important to get ahead of even more*

*discussion on this which may well come if this spreads more to US and elsewhere and other “respected” scientists publish something more inflammatory.’*

The paper Farrar was referring to was something he had in fact commissioned. Ten days earlier, he had called for a teleconference to discuss the emerging, strong evidence that the virus looked like it had been engineered in a lab. After the teleconference, he said in private that he was 50-50 on the issue of whether Covid came from a lab and bought himself a burner phone. But neither he nor any of the dozen people in the meeting thought it appropriate to tell us, the plebs, of their suspicions.

Now, 10 days later in the taxi, Farrar wants the issue ‘put to bed’, even though he knows the last hope of finding evidence for a natural origin of the virus – the pangolin theory – has already fallen apart. That’s because the pangolin virus lacks the very addition that alarmed the scientists about Covid, a thing called a furin cleavage site.

Five days after his taxi ride, Farrar would indeed help ‘put to bed’ the lab-leak theory by reading the draft paper (written at his suggestion,

remember) and asking that the authors change the wording from ‘unlikely’ to ‘improbable’. He then promises to ‘push’ the paper towards a major journal, *Nature Medicine*, all while refusing to be listed as either an author or in the acknowledgements. That itself is a breach of scientific ethics.

The day after the taxi ride, Daszak replies to Farrar’s email asking him and the other recipients to sign a separate letter ‘to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that Covid-19 does not have a natural origin’. By return, ‘50-50’ Farrar – who knows this is not a conspiracy theory but a reasonable possibility, remember – agrees to sign this letter. He goes further, pushing Daszak to publish the letter at the *Lancet* rather than on a website.

Daszak writes to the letter’s signatories on 16 February:

*‘As a way to get our statement across directly to the senior leaders in the governments of China and around the world, Jeremy Farrar (director of the*

*Wellcome Trust, and co-signatory) suggested that I submit this letter to the editor of the Lancet for possible publication.'*

This time, it was Daszak who would disguise his own role in organising the letter, saying he will 'put it out in a way that doesn't link it back to our collaboration so we maximise an independent voice'. In the event, the *Lancet*, disgracefully, took more than a year to correct the statement at the end of the letter that none of the authors had a conflict of interest.

Thus, we now know that the two documents that persuaded the entire political, media and scientific establishment that a lab leak was not just unlikely but also improbable, perhaps even impossible, were highly misleading propaganda efforts by people with conflicts of interest who knew them to be misleading.

I should know: at the time of these events I was on the science and technology committee of the House of Lords. I thought a lab leak was unlikely but possible. Then these two statements were published. To my eternal shame, I – and my committee colleagues – took these two papers

as definitive evidence against the lab-leak theory from experts in the field. Several peers and journalists asked me if a lab leak was likely. No, I said – these two papers have ruled it out.

Several months later, I discovered that I had been lied to: deliberately, maliciously, consequentially. Yes, I am angry about that. So should you be.

**Matt Ridley** is a science writer and co-author of *Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19*, with Alina Chan.

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## COMMENTS

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