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Hundreds of scientists, physicians, and advocates condemn “political” decision to cancel vital NIH coronavirus grant

Action called “irresponsible” and “dangerous”. Cancelled grant helped increase understanding of coronaviruses, develop diagnostics and identify drugs - including remdesivir - active against these viruses.

May 7, 2020 - Today, the COVID-19 Working Group–NY (CWG-NY) sent a letter, signed by 29 organizations, more than 300 scientists, physicians, and community health advocates, to Dr. Francis Collins, Director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and Alex Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services, along with officials on the House Oversight Committee and the Senate Health Committee. The letter expresses outrage at the canceling of a major R01 grant to the EcoHealth Alliance, an international collaboration that studies coronaviruses in bats to determine how they may evolve to transmit in human populations.

Signatories of the letter – which include scientists from many top research institutions across the US including Harvard, Yale, Stanford, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, University of Wisconsin, University of Florida, University of California San Francisco, University of Washington, AstraZeneca, and Columbia University – called for immediate release of the NIH R01 funds to EcoHealth and for an investigation into the decision-making process that canceled the grant funding in the first place.

"Canceling a grant that provided so much valuable information about coronaviruses in bat species is simply wrong and irresponsible, especially in the midst of a devastating pandemic caused by a coronavirus,” said David Ho, Director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center of Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons. “The precedent is dangerous.”

As reported by Science Magazine, and made clear by direct statements from President Donald Trump and his administration, the cancelation of this grant is based on an unsubstantiated theory that SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19) was purposefully or accidentally released from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The grant funds research into bat coronaviruses, a known reservoir that has already been the origin of two deadly human coronaviruses – SARS and MERS. In its first five years, the grant - which was recently renewed - has produced impressive results, including crucial research to determine the identity of the virus causing COVID-19. Research from
the grant also led to the identification of antiviral medications being investigated as potential treatments for COVID-19 – including remdesivir in 2017.

No credible, peer-reviewed scientific evidence has been produced to confirm the theory that SARS-CoV-2 was developed and released from a lab. On the contrary, significant evidence suggests that the evolution of the virus is consistent with initial transmission of SARS-CoV-2 to humans in the wild. The decision to cancel this grant was based on everything but science.

“The decision of the National Institute of Health (NIH) to cancel a highly productive research grant based on a conspiracy theory is political censorship of scientific thought,” said James Krellenstein, a co-founder of the Coronavirus Working Group and the PrEP4All Collaboration, "such actions threaten not only the integrity of the NIH, but also the United States’ position as a global leader in biomedical research.”

“The NIH has well-defined procedures in place for canceling grants; these procedures were clearly not followed. The lack of transparency and adherence to existing rules is deeply troubling,” said Seth Darst, Jack Fishman Professor at The Rockefeller University and member of the United States National Academy of Sciences. “These actions suggest political interference into a valuable international scientific collaboration at the worst possible time. We should be embarrassed.”

“Making grant funding contingent on political expediency rather than sound science is outrageous, antithetical to the scientific method, and profoundly dangerous to public health,” said Angela Rasmussen, Associate Research Scientist and Ebola and SARS-CoV-2 researcher at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. “It sets an ominous precedent that urgent, crucial research on SARS-CoV-2 and other threats may be hindered by political interference, leaving us more vulnerable in the future.”

The research published by the EcoHealth Alliance prior to the COVID-19 pandemic has also been essential to the rapid worldwide development of RNA and antibody tests that have helped governments slow the spread of SARS-CoV-2. NIH grantmaking is a time-tested process that involves expert review of preliminary data and detailed research plans by highly trained scientists. Scientists and community health advocates insist that this process must remain independent of political influence, particularly in a time of public health crisis.

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**About the COVID-19 Working Group**

*The Covid-19 Working Group – New York is a coalition of doctors, healthcare professionals, scientists, social workers, community workers, activists, and epidemiologists committed to a rapid and community-oriented response to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. For more information, go to [https://www.covid-19workinggroupnyc.org/](https://www.covid-19workinggroupnyc.org/) or @covid19ny on Twitter.*