



Prominent scientist 'downplayed Covid lab leak theory to avoid upsetting China'

Private messages show Prof Andrew Rambaut helped stifle debate into virus's origins because he feared 's---show' for accusing Beijing

By Sarah Knapton, SCIENCE EDITOR

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An influential British scientist played down the Covid lab leak theory to avoid angering China, newly released messages suggest.

Prof Andrew Rambaut, professor of molecular evolution at the University of Edinburgh, was one of the authors of a paper published in *Nature Medicine* in

Rambaut, was one of the authors of a key paper published in Nature Medicine in March 2020.

The paper, The Proximal Origin of Sars-CoV-2, argued that a natural spillover event caused the pandemic and was hugely instrumental in stifling debate into the origins of the virus.

But private messages released by the US Oversight Committee, which is investigating the origins of Covid, show that in the weeks before publication the authors had acknowledged that a laboratory leak was a possibility but were concerned about upsetting the Chinese.

'Extreme caution'

In a conversation with first author Prof Kristian Andersen, of the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, on Feb 2 2020, Prof Rambaut wrote: "Given the s--- show that would happen if anyone seriously accused the Chinese of even accidental release, my feeling is we should say there is no evidence of a specifically engineered virus, we cannot possibly distinguish between natural evolution and escape, so we are content with ascribing it to a natural process."

Prof Andersen replied: "Yup, I totally agree that that's a very reasonable conclusion. Although I hate it when politics is injected into science - but it's impossible not to, especially given the circumstance. We should be sensitive to that."

Later in the exchange, Prof Rambaut admitted that a mutation in the Covid virus could have occurred in the laboratory through a process called passaging, where viruses evolve in laboratory animals or cell cultures over time.

"I agree it smells really fishy, but without a smoking gun it will do us no good," he wrote.

"My position is that natural evolution is entirely plausible and we will have to leave it at that. Lab passaging might also generate this mutation but we have no evidence that that happened.

"I suggest we write this report erring on the side of extreme caution."

Dozens of scientists have now signed an open letter to Nature Medicine calling for the paper to be retracted.

One of the signatories, Prof Neil Harrison, professor of anaesthesiology, molecular pharmacology and therapeutics at Columbia University, said: "Virologists and their allies have produced a number of papers that purport to show that the virus was of

natural origin and that the pandemic began at the Huanan seafood market.

“In fact there is no evidence for either of these conclusions, and the email and Slack messages among the authors show that they knew at the time that this was the case.

“Scientists in the clinical and contiguous sciences have argued against these papers almost from the beginning, and have been subjected to volleys of abuse. This is the first retraction call but it won’t be the last.”



Covid emerged just a few miles from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where Chinese scientists had been collecting and manipulating bat coronaviruses – leading to widespread speculation that a deadly experiment could have leaked from a laboratory.

Yet after the research paper was published, serious probing into the laboratory theory effectively stopped.

In the messages, Prof Andersen said that the presence of a furin cleavage site, which helps the virus enter human cells, “moves me slightly more towards accidental release”. However, he said it was “well above my pay grade to call the shots on a final conclusion”.

He also expressed concern that scientists had been working on dangerous viruses and warned about gain-of-function research that aims to improve the infectiousness or deadliness of a virus.

“The main concern coming up reading through all these papers is the kind of stuff that is being done – getting Mers-like viruses to infect humans and Sars-like viruses to cause disease in mice and infect humans,” he wrote.

“There’s a very strong focus on the spike protein for all that work.

“I am not sure that type of knowledge is at all actionable, while, of course, being exceptionally dangerous,” he said. “It only takes one mistake.”

Yet by the time the paper was published, the authors dismissed the possibility of laboratory engineering – concluding: “Our analyses clearly show that Sars-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus.” Laboratory passaging and accidental release were also ruled out.

Responding to the release of messages, Prof Rambaut said that there was no proof of accidental release, so the team had erred on the side of caution.

“We had no evidence it was anything other than a virus from nature,” he said: “Don’t go accusing people of things if there is no evidence.”

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The director of the FBI, Christopher Wray, tells Fox News that the Bureau “has for quite some time now assessed that the origins of the pandemic are most likely a potential lab incident in Wuhan”. Wray thereby provides public confirmation for the first time of the FBI’s classified judgement on the origins of the virus.

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The University of Edinburgh would not say whether Prof Rambaut would be investigated for academic misconduct, but said it was committed to freedom of expression.

“This means we respect the rights of staff to freely discuss matters relating to their research with colleagues, be it in public or private,” said a spokesman.

Responding to the Slack messages on Twitter, Prof Andersen said: “These perfect examples of science in progress have been hijacked by grifters and conspiracy theorists, and turned into a nonsensical political circus where individual scientists

(i.e. human beings) are being targeted and harassed.”

Nature Medicine said it would not be retracting the article, which is a Correspondence, an article type in which authors present a point of view on the issue rather than being a research study.

Dr Joao Monteiro, chief editor of Nature Medicine, said: “Concerns raised about any type of article in our journal are always considered carefully.

“However, when it comes to expressing opinions, it is our position that it is the authors’ prerogative to balance their views in a way that reflects the body of robust scientific knowledge available at the time of publication, as well as the impact of their findings.

“Neither previous out-of-context remarks by the authors nor disagreements with the authors’ stated views, are, on their own, grounds for retraction. We have therefore concluded that retraction is not warranted at this time.”

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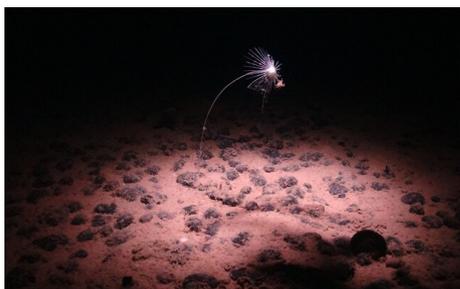


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