



Major Covid report suggests virus could have leaked from a US lab

The Lancet's paper said it is 'feasible' that Sars-Cov-2 emerged from a natural spillover or a lab incident, but elements provoke backlash

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The Lancet is facing a backlash after a major Covid-19 Commission report suggested the disease may have leaked from a laboratory in the United States.

Published on Wednesday, the paper said it remains “feasible” that Sars-Cov-2 [emerged from either a natural spillover or a laboratory incident](#), and called for the introduction of more safeguards to reduce the risk of either eventuality.

But the report, the [result of two years of work](#), also suggested American researchers could be culpable. As well as mentioning facilities in Wuhan, it noted that “independent researchers have not yet investigated” US labs, and said the National Institutes of Health has “resisted disclosing details” of its work.

The report comes as controversy swirls the commission chair, the economist Prof Jeffrey Sachs.

At a conference in Madrid earlier this year, he said he was [“pretty convinced”](#) that Sars-Cov-2 “came out of a US lab of biotechnology, not out of nature” – a claim that has since been [widely promoted by Chinese diplomats](#).

In August, Prof Sachs also appeared on a podcast hosted by Robert F Kennedy, Jr – one of the world’s most prominent anti-vaccine commentators – to discuss his beliefs, just days after Instagram and Facebook suspended an account led by Mr Kennedy for repeatedly sharing what the platforms said was Covid misinformation, especially around vaccines

‘Shameful moment’

Experts said Prof Sachs actions have overshadowed much of the robust research and recommendations within the 58-page report, and criticised the Lancet for resisting calls to remove him.

“Sachs’ appearance on RFK Jr’s podcast... undermines the seriousness of the Lancet Commission’s mission to the point of completely negating it,” said Prof Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization in Canada.

“This may be one of the Lancet’s most shameful moments regarding its role as a steward and leader in communicating crucial findings about science and medicine,” she said, adding that she was “pretty shocked at how flagrantly” the report ignores key evidence on Covid origins.



Experts said Prof Sachs actions have overshadowed much of the robust research and recommendations within the 58-page report | CREDIT: Horacio Villalobos/Corbis/Corbis via Getty Images

Prof David Robertson, of the University of Glasgow’s Centre for Virus Research, added: “It’s really disappointing to see such a potentially influential report contributing to further misinformation on such an important topic.”

“It’s true we’ve details to understand on the side of natural origins, for example the exact intermediate species involved, but that doesn’t mean there’s... any basis to the wild speculation that US labs were involved,” he added.

When approached by the *Telegraph*, Prof Sachs stood by his previous comments, adding that he personally “oversaw this part of the work” on the emergence of Sars-Cov-2. Last summer he [disbanded an initial task force led by Dr Peter Daszak](#) amid concerns it was too biased towards the natural origin hypothesis.

It was never re-formed, but Prof Sachs said commissioners had “consulted widely and met with a number of scientists”.

“Everybody has signed off on the final text. The question of a possible laboratory release mostly involves the question of US-China joint work that was underway on Sars-like viruses,” he said.

But Prof Peter Hotez, a member of the Lancet Commission and dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at the Baylor College of Medicine in Texas, said there had been “diverse views” and that he had “pushed hard on removing” mention of US labs in the report because it was “a distraction”.

He added that he had been “speechless” when Prof Sachs appeared on Mr Kennedy’s podcast.

Countries still lack 'meaningful' pandemic plans

Discussion around the origins of Sars-Cov-2 was only a small element of the report, and experts said the rest of the paper was based on robust research.

The report found the Covax scheme was hampered by science policy and implementation failures, warned most countries still lack “meaningful” pandemic preparedness plans, stressed that more needed to be done to combat vaccine hesitancy globally, and noted the “striking... irresponsibility of several influential political leaders”.

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It also criticised the World Health Organization for acting too slowly in the early days of the pandemic, suggesting it “repeatedly erred on the side of reserve rather than boldness” – for instance around the delay in calling a public health emergency, and a “hesitancy” to confirm Covid could spread through airborne transmission.

The UN health agency also “fell victim to the increasing tensions between the United States and China”, the commissioners warned, adding that better international collaboration will be key to prevent epidemics becoming pandemics in future.

The WHO said it welcomed “the overarching recommendations”, but said there were “[several key omissions and misinterpretations](#)” around the agency's initial response.

The researchers analysed the varying approaches to the disease around the world, too. The Western Pacific “stands out for its very low average mortality rate,” possibly as the region’s

experience of the Sars epidemic in 2003 had left it better prepared to tackle new pathogens.

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mortality rate “reflects the failures of this region to take concrete measures to suppress the epidemic, and high vulnerability to deaths from Covid-19 due to structural characteristics”.

Meanwhile in Europe, governments aimed “only to slow the transmission of the virus”, rather than suppress the pandemic. The commissioners suggested countries were repeatedly pushed into stringent lockdowns as measures were completely rescinded too quickly, allowing new waves of disease to hit.

The Commission made 11 recommendations, including stronger regulation of the wild animal trade, the creation of a new WHO biosecurity oversight authority, better international coordination in the face of infectious diseases, and a new \$60 billion a year Global Health Fund to support health systems and pandemic preparedness in lower income countries.

A spokesperson for the Lancet said that the publication had, in collaboration with Prof Sachs, “regularly evaluated the work of each Task Force as scientific evidence about Covid-19 evolved, to ensure that the final peer-reviewed report will provide valuable new insights to support a coordinated, global response to Covid-19 as well as to prevent future pandemics and contain future disease outbreaks.”

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