

## Anti-vaxxers and anti-GMO lobby double down on COVID China conspiracy theory

As the World Health Organization warns of a misinformation “infodemic,” anti-science groups around the world are doubling down on a dizzying array of competing conspiracy theories about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though [earlier 5G conspiracy theories](#) appear to be fading, extremist groups on both sides of the political spectrum are converging around a newer narrative. Now they’re claiming that the SARS-CoV-2 virus is not natural at all — despite a scientific consensus to the contrary — but was somehow created as part of a biowarfare program in a Chinese lab.

This theory has gained currency among conservative news outlets like Breitbart, which [gives it regular coverage](#) under the politically charged slogan “Make China Pay,” as well as among anti-vaccine and anti-GMO groups. They apparently share a common goal: undermining public trust in mainstream science and stopping the development of medical interventions, such as antiviral drugs and vaccines, to tackle the pandemic.

American anti-vaccination campaigners have posted inflammatory material on Instagram, alleging that biowarfare experts aimed at creating “#COVID Pandemic superbugs.” Anti-GMO groups then piled on. The United States-based Organic Consumers Association amplified those false statements and joined the United Kingdom’s GM Watch in posting long diatribes questioning the current scientific consensus about the origins of the virus and alleging nefarious intent by China.

Rumors that the Chinese created COVID deliberately, perhaps even as a biowarfare tool, have now become so widespread that Professor Yuan Zhiming, director of the National Biosafety Laboratory within the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), has been forced to directly rebut them.

In an [interview with Reuters news agency](#), Yuan said that the claims were “malicious” and had been “pulled out of thin air.”

“The WIV does not have the intention and the ability to design and construct a new coronavirus,” Yuan told Reuters. “Moreover, there is no information within the SARS-CoV-2 genome indicating it was manmade.”

As the [Alliance for Science reported earlier](#), there is now a strong consensus within the scientific community that the SARS-CoV-2 virus originated in bats and jumped to humans, probably via an intermediate host such as pangolins.

This theory is supported by genetic evidence from the virus. Scientists [writing in Nature Medicine](#) journal on March 17 made clear that “all notable SARS-CoV-2 features” were also observed “in related coronaviruses in nature” and that therefore “we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

In contrast, the conspiracy theory about COVID being synthesized in a Chinese lab was originally seeded

via a [slick hour-long documentary](#) produced by the Epoch Times, an English-language news outlet based in the United States with links to the Falun Gong religious cult that has long been persecuted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The theory is now, however, being aggressively promoted by anti-GMO and anti-vaccination activists. In an April 29 rant entitled “Murder Most Foul: The Perps Behind COVID-19,” Organic Consumers Association (OCA) chief Ronnie Cummins accused “Chinese and US officials, Big Pharma, Facebook, Google and an arrogant and unscrupulous network of global scientists” of “frantically trying to cover up the lab origins and diabolical machinations of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

OCA is one of America’s most consistent anti-science campaign groups. It has been [directly implicated](#) in the resurgence of measles in some locations due to its anti-vaccination activism. It also funds US Right to Know, an anti-GMO group which has been active in [harassing scientists](#) who work in public sector agricultural biotechnology research.

Cummins writes: “Activist critics of genetic engineering and biological warfare experiments, including myself, Dr. Mercola [a quack alternative health doctor banned from Google] and GM Watch, joined now by independent voices in the mass media, are reporting, albeit in some cases reluctantly, that mounting evidence indicates that the deadly COVID-19 virus may have accidentally leaked out of one of the supposedly high-security biowarfare labs” in China, including the WIV.

Rumors and conspiracy theories such as these can act to undermine public trust in science. They have particularly dangerous consequences during the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic, for which the only likely exit strategy involves global deployment of an effective vaccine.

As the [Alliance for Science](#) and [Financial Times reported](#), anti-vaccination groups have been involved in organizing anti-lockdown protests in the US and worrying signs are emerging in some countries that skepticism toward vaccinations is increasing in the population.

“In a world where anti-vaccination advocates and climate-change denialists persist, talking sense might seem hopeless, especially when social-media algorithms and deliberate bad actors amplify pseudoscience messages,” University of Alberta health law and policy researcher Timothy Caulfield wrote [in Nature](#). “There is no easy answer to solving this, but science-informed messages are not easily found. We need more researchers making an effort.”

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