

# MANMADE *CONTAGION* VIRUSES ALREADY IN THE US (If Only Laurence Fishburne Were the CDC'S Biosafety Director)



## *Contagion* and the CDC's Sunday Clothes

In the pandemic thriller **CONTAGION**, the fictitious MEV-1 virus starts life as a bat virus, jumps to pigs, then jumps to humans. It quickly spreads person to person, and rapidly moves from Asia to the rest of the world.

As soon as the lethality of the virus becomes apparent, Ellis Cheever, the fictitious CDC officer played by Laurence Fishburne, insists that all research on the virus be done in BSL-4 labs—the highest level of containment, with scientists dressed in high-tech suits and equipped with independent oxygen supplies. “The last thing we need,” Fishburne/Cheever grumbles, “is this walking out of the lab on someone’s shoe.”



Cheever’s concern about restricting the pathogen to BSL-4 is probably unrealistic given that the virus in question was already “out there” among the public and spreading rapidly. The San Francisco BSL-3

researcher (played by Elliot Gould) who ignores Cheever’s order to “shut down” certainly thought so—and the movie takes his side, since the nose-thumbing researcher finds a cell line crucial for developing a vaccine.

It’s a good movie moment for the CDC, though. Aren’t we lucky that we have regulatory agencies like the CDC taking the utmost precautions to keep the public safe? The movie suggests we should all just sit back and let our heroic, and safety-conscious, public health agencies do their jobs and save us from extinction.



The movies, alas, are not real life, despite the fact that this one hired a noted scientist and a noted science writer as consultants.

The fact is, government-funded researchers at the CDC and multiple universities are hard at work genetically engineering potential **CONTAGION** viruses.

## **Bird Flu Monsters**

Not long after **CONTAGION** left the theatres, government-funded researchers said they had created forms of the bird flu which were transmissible between ferrets—and thus very possibly between humans. A minor media storm erupted, and the researchers eventually changed their stories about how lethal the new creations were.

The National Institutes of Health, which funded the research, acted as if it were “surprised” by the outcome. But in fact, the government’s own Centers for Disease began creating bird flu hybrids in 2000.

The science community itself raised alarms about the experiments in 2004. (“Tiptoeing around Pandora’s Box” in *Science* and “Superflu Is Being Brewed in the Lab” in *New Scientist*.) **GERMS GONE WILD** devotes a whole chapter to various efforts to genetically engineer “Frankenstein germs.”

An especially worrisome example occurred in 2010, when University of Wisconsin researcher Yoshohiro Kawaoka announced he had created all 254 possible mutated offspring of H5N1 bird flu and H3N2 human flu. Twenty-two of the artificial creations were even deadlier than the parent bird flu strain, which already kills 60% of the people who get it.

Kawaoka’s 2010 hybrids had only been tested in mice at that point, so they are only potentially transmissible between humans. The hybrids which Kawaoka created in 2012—which he says are transmissible between ferrets and likely transmissible between humans—involved crosses of H5N1 and H1N1.

Why is the creation of human-to-human transmissible bird flus a big deal? Because so far, people can only catch bird flu from infected chickens. That’s good, considering the 60% kill rate.

Do these sound like experiments which—if anyone were crazy enough to do them in the first place—ought to be done in BSL-4? Not to the CDC, which didn’t have Laurence Fishburne or a scientific consultant (sic) around to advise it, and so allowed the

world’s deadliest existing pathogen to be created—and tinkered with—in BSL-3.



### Digging Up a Vampire’s Coffin

Exhibit Two: researchers at the CDC and elsewhere, finding life in the early twenty-first century a bit too sedate, decided they would take DNA scraps from a corpse or two and resurrect the 1918 flu. Pathogens have to live, too—and the deadlier the pathogen—no matter how dead or previously nonexistent it is—the more it interests extreme-sport researchers. And since the 1918 flu killed 50 to 100 million worldwide, it’s pretty high up in the germ pecking order.

Once the scientists succeeded, they published the entire genetic blueprint in scientific journals, just in case there should really be a bioterrorist out there (other than Bruce Ivins) who really did want to kill a large number of people.

Nor did the researchers rest on their laurels. They announced plans to create mutations of the 1918 flu, and infect monkeys and pigs with them.

A lot of this research, also, was and is being done in one of the over 1400 lower-level BSL-3 labs.



### **Germ Which Inspired *Contagion*'s MEV-1 Coming to Kansas?**

*Contagion* scientific consultant Ian Lipkin recently revealed that the movie's MEV-1 virus was inspired by the real-world Nipah virus, a rare pathogen which killed 100 or so people in Malaysia in 1998-1999. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) wants to bring the Nipah and Hendra viruses—two deadly but rare zoonotic pathogens-- to the National Bio-and Agro Facility it wants/plans to build at Kansas State University, in the heart of America's livestock belt.

Zoonotic diseases are ones which spread from animals to humans. (In *Contagion*, bat and pig viruses recombine and then jump to humans.) Both **GERMS GONE WILD** (417-418) and a National Academy of Sciences panel expressed concern about DHS's plans to conduct zoonotic and foot-and-mouth disease research near Kansas State's livestock herds and football stadium.

Unlike the fictitious MEV-1, the Nipah virus has not spread easily between humans, and was effectively contained in Asia by quarantine. Importing it into the United States and putting it in the proximity of livestock and large crowds of people seems an unnecessary gamble.



### ***Contagion*, Bioterror Obsession, and the Risks**

In *Contagion*, CDC officer Cheever dismisses concerns by the Department of Homeland Security that the virus in question might be a weaponized bird flu, declaring: "Someone doesn't have to weaponize the bird flu. The birds are doing that."

This is an appropriate response to the extent it undercuts bioterror alarmism. Unfortunately, it's not the response the real CDC gave over the past decade.

Both the CDC and its parent organization, the National Institutes of Health, eagerly jumped on the biodefense bandwagon, exhibiting various forms of reckless behavior and a penchant for secrecy and deception previously associated with the CIA and defense agencies. American public health agencies obsessed over biodefense to the detriment of their traditional research agenda, a fact that 750 of 1143 NIH-funded microbiologists formally complained about in 2005.

And of course, those agencies helped to "weaponize" bird flu, creating hybrid monsters which nature itself might never have gotten around to. Presumably the CDC and NIH thinks the risks are minimal. Of course, some of us remember that in 2001 the CDC underestimated the risks to postal workers of anthrax-laden envelopes.

All a “Frankenstein flu” pandemic will require is one infected researcher. There have been quite a few of those over the past several years—including the 2009 death of a University of Chicago plague researcher.

Several sick researchers have moved among the public for weeks before their infections were accurately diagnosed. Usually they didn’t suspect the diseases they worked with on a daily basis, apparently not really believing they could be infected. They and we were lucky because, so far, researchers haven’t been sick with pandemic pathogens.

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