

**Statement to the Biological Weapons Convention  
Meeting of States Parties  
United Nations Geneva, 22 November 2021**



Mr Chair, Distinguished Representatives:

One of the most politicised aspects of Covid-19 has been the question of how the pandemic started. One theory is that the virus spilled over naturally from animals to humans. Another theory is that it originated from scientific research where the virus accidentally escaped from a laboratory or scientists were infecting during fieldwork when they were collecting viral samples from bats.

It is likely we will never know the answer with any real level of confidence. We are now nearly two years into the pandemic and we've still not had a credible international investigation. Unfortunately, there are no signs that we will get one any time soon either.

But what we do know is that it is possible to produce biological weapons that are worse than Covid-19. And we do know that dangerous viruses can escape from many labs around the world.

Dangerous viruses have been created in labs during the course of regular scientific research for many years now.

- In 2005, for example, scientists recreated the 1918 influenza virus that caused the deadliest pandemic of the twentieth century.
- In 2011, scientists manipulated the H5N1 bird flu virus to enable it to transmit between mammals, including humans. Before then, the virus had only been transmitted from birds to people, with a fatality rate of 30-60%. In comparison, Covid-19 has a fatality rate of less than 5%.
- In 2018, scientists synthetically created horsepox from scratch for just \$100,000. Could the same methods be used to create smallpox, the viral cousin of horsepox? The lead scientist on the project commented: "Have I increased that risk? I don't know. Maybe yes, but in reality that risk has always been there." Can we leave these types of decisions to individual researchers?

Globally, there are now around 60 maximum containment (BSL-4) labs that work with the most dangerous viruses and bacteria, the ones that we don't have vaccines or treatments for. These labs are spread over 23 countries. About half of them are in Europe. Most of them are in big cities. The biggest one is in Wuhan, the city where Covid-19 started.

We know there have been accidents and near-misses in many labs, including BSL4 labs. According to the Global Health Security Index, a comprehensive global survey of countries' preparedness to prevent and respond to pandemics, only one-quarter of countries with BSL4 labs have a good score on best practice indicators for biosafety and biosecurity. That means that three-quarters of countries with BSL4 labs get low scores for biosafety and biosecurity.

None of these labs have adopted the new international ISO standard for biorisk management in labs, and only 40% of countries with BSL4 labs are members of the International Experts Group of Biosafety and Biosecurity Regulators (IEGBBR).

Only a handful of countries with BSL4 labs have oversight or regulatory policies in place for dual-use research. This means that the vast majority of countries with BSL-4 labs do not have specific oversight of high-risk gain-of-function research that has been a central feature in the debate on Covid-19's origin.

While all countries with BSL4 labs report their labs under the confidence-building measures of the BWC, only nine make their reports publicly available. Only 55 percent of the BSL4 labs in operation provide links to their publications on their institutional websites.

Mr Chair,

We emphatically support the joint NGO statement's call for consistent implementation of international standards on appropriate biorisk management practices, especially in laboratories working with high-risk zoonotic pathogens with pandemic potential.

We also strongly encourage States Parties to give greater prominence to biorisk management in their national implementation of the BWC and to share their expertise and experience with building risk-based laboratory infrastructure that is fit for purpose, is safe and secure, and that can be maintained over the long term.

Finally, at the international level, there is no authoritative international institution tracking the number of biological laboratories or ensuring research oversight. BWC States Parties must consider and consult with other relevant bodies so that the best international structures and mechanisms can be introduced to systematically register and monitor high-containment labs and high-risk biological research to ensure that all such research is being conducted safely, securely and responsibly.

**Dr Filippa Lentzos** is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Science & International Security in the Department of War Studies, and Co-Director of the Centre for Science & Security Studies, at King's College London in the United Kingdom.

**Dr Gregory D. Koblentz** is Associate Professor and Director of the Biodefense Graduate Program at George Mason University's Schar School of Policy and Government in the United States.