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Public Health Experts Weigh In on WHO Pandemic Treaty Amid Growing Support for COVID Lab Leak Theory

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The World Health Organization (WHO) has come under renewed scrutiny in recent days over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and its plans for addressing pandemics in the future.

This week, the World Health Assembly—the WHO’s decision-making body—began considering new ways to govern [international responses](#) to disease outbreaks. An early-stage

draft before the Assembly includes both binding and non-binding language regarding how nations handle disease outbreaks internally, as well as how they coordinate with international partners. Article 15 of the draft document ([pdf](#)) specifically describes the WHO as the “directing and coordinating authority on international health work,” and says the WHO’s Director-General shall be the one to declare pandemics. The WHO’s draft document also calls for wealthier developed nations to reserve a percentage of the diagnostic tools and disease treatments they create to share with developing nations.

Some critics of the WHO’s proposed international pandemic response network have raised concerns that the system would require participating countries to cede a degree of their sovereignty, resources, and decision-making independence to a superseding global body.

“It [the WHO] funds a bureaucracy writ large: A

new organization, a governing board, which would presumably be under WHO, requires countries to give a certain percentage of their health budgets to emergencies and sets up a supply network for the WHO,” said David Bell, a public health physician and former WHO staffer specializing in epidemic policy, in an interview with NTD News.

The WHO draft document says it “reaffirms” the sovereignty of participating nations, though the convention would require participating countries to contribute resources and funding in times of pandemics, while simultaneously giving the WHO the power to declare such pandemics.

The document defines a “pandemic” as “the global spread of a pathogen or variant that infects human populations with limited or no immunity through sustained and high transmissibility from person to person, overwhelming health systems with severe morbidity and high mortality, and causing social

and economic disruptions, all of which require effective national and global collaboration and coordination for its control.”

The proposed treaty states that participating countries shall provide funding for the international pandemic response framework, and shall establish regulatory measures within their home countries to “accelerate the process of approving and licensing pandemic-related products for emergency use in a timely manner” —including waiving intellectual property rights on medical products that are developed to address pandemics.

Bell outlined his concerns that the WHO’s ability to declare pandemics and, thus, trigger the sharing of resources and funding would present an internal conflict of interest.

“[The global pandemic response proposals] put [pandemic response measures] in the hands of an individual and a bureaucracy whose sole function is to find threats and institute this,” Bell

said. “So we’re putting a mechanism in place that will be self-perpetuating, and its sole role is to find and respond to emergencies and institute the poverty-increasing measures, the wealth-concentration measures, etc., that we’ve seen over the last three years.”

Distrust of WHO

The pandemic response treaty comes about as the WHO has been criticized heavily for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the initial COVID outbreak, then National Security Advisor Robert O’Brien alleged that China was slow to provide information about the risks posed by the virus. Furthermore, several weeks passed before a WHO team was allowed to enter the country. The WHO’s initial report on the outbreak, however, then praised the Chinese response—while making little mention of the Chinese regime’s efforts to suppress critics and whistleblowers who brought attention

to the virus outbreak.

The World Health Assembly began debating the proposed pandemic response treaty in the same week that U.S. Department of Energy investigators [reported](#) that the COVID-19 outbreak likely began as a leak from a Chinese virology laboratory.

The WHO has been accused of helping to suppress indications that COVID-19 came from a lab leak. In a March 2021 report, the WHO [described](#) the lab leak theory as “extremely unlikely.” In July of 2021, however, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [walked back](#) that assessment, saying it was “premature” to rule out the lab leak theory. Peter Ben Embarak, the WHO researcher who led the research effort in China, later [claimed](#) the Chinese regime pressured his team to dismiss the lab leak theory.

The WHO has a history of downplaying information that could reflect negatively on

China, according to Dr. Rik Mehta, a health care law professor at Georgetown University and a former Republican Senate candidate in New Jersey.

“When COVID first started, there was this push to say, well, if you thought that it originated from China, and it was man-made, then you’re a conspiracy theorist. And if you say that it’s a ‘Wuhan virus’ or something related to China, then you’re a racist,” Mehta told NTD News.

“And so now we know that that’s completely untangling and that there is a probability that it could have been man-made, made in a laboratory, and then leaked out of that laboratory subsequently.”

Mehta believes the lab leak theory is the most likely scenario for the origins of COVID-19.

“[COVID-19] is unlike any other viruses we’ve seen. Zika, monkeypox, Ebola [are] viruses that have been around for more than 50-plus years. COVID is something that’s brand new to the

scientific community, to the public at large. And so it's hard to argue that it was created in wet markets or animal-to-human transmission," Mehta said. "And the likely prevailing theory was that it was created in the laboratory. Really the true question here is: Was it leaked accidentally? Or was it leaked on purpose?"

Mehta also urged caution against the WHO's pandemic response agreement, given past problems with sharing information about the spread of viruses.

"Of course, there's a level of interplay [where] countries need to work together and participate when you truly have a pandemic the size of COVID," Mehta said. "That being said, this cannot be taken lightly. Every country needs to protect their sovereignty: They cannot just give an unelected body, an international governmental organization that has no accountability to the people, and ceding that kind of authority that can then get into the lives

of Americans.”

Mehta called for members of Congress to thoroughly review any WHO pandemic treaty before entering the United States into such an agreement.

Last month, Republican Senators introduced a [bill](#) that would bar U.S. participation in a WHO global pandemic response agreement without first gaining the approval of the U.S. Senate.

NTD News reached out to the WHO for comment but did not receive a response before this article was published.

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