Is RSV another virus from a lab?

A look at its origins as it surges in youngsters around the world

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Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) is surging around the world right now. Could this be due to “immunity debt” after lockdowns or because Covid and/or mass vaccination has messed around with our immune systems? The majority of young children have not been vaccinated against Covid, so the direct effect of vaccination can be ruled out here.

RSV is relatively mild for healthy adults but can be more dangerous to young children and the elderly. Ever year there are approximately 30 million acute respiratory illnesses and over 60,000 childhood deaths caused by RSV worldwide.

But where did RSV come from?

According to Wikipedia it was first discovered in 1956 when researchers isolated a virus from a population of chimpanzees with respiratory illness. It was later realised that the chimpanzees actually caught the infection from their caretakers.

However, a different version of this story exists. As it is extremely unlikely that the real truth will ever come to light, you decide which version sounds more plausible, the Wikipedia entry above, or the alternative below. Please add any other details you have in the comments below.

Whilst Wikipedia is correct, in that RSV was first discovered in 1956, the story begins a year earlier in 1955.

This was a time when research was being undertaken into the mass production of the polio viral vaccine. In order to conduct the research, viruses were grown in monkey kidney cells. As a result hundreds of thousands of monkeys were shipped to the US.

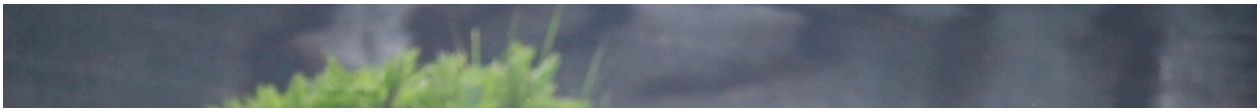

Photo by Anna Roberts on Unsplash

In late 1955 a troop of chimpanzees at the Walter Reed Army Institute began coughing and sneezing. Morris et al isolated the agent that caused the respiratory illness in one of the chimps and called it Chimpanzee Coryza Agent Virus (CCA). The remaining 13 chimps all developed antibodies to this newly isolated virus.

As documented by Morris, a person working at the Institute started to experience respiratory infection and later developed antibodies to CCA. Once this worker had become infected, a new name was proposed - Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and from then on, CCA was rarely used in medical literature.

They were curious about this new virus and so susceptible chimpanzees were inoculated intranasally with CCA virus. After a 3 day incubation period, this new troop of monkeys all got ill as well.

A year later, in 1957, Chanock and Finberg reported on recovery from infants with respiratory illness of a virus related to CCA. They said it is clear that their findings show that the viruses infecting the infants are indistinguishable from the CCA virus.

Subsequently, the virus was recovered from infants and small children with pneumonia or bronchiolitis in the Maryland-District of Columbia.

In the winter of 1958, Beem et al isolated a similar virus, with antigenic similarities, in Chicago.

By 1961, Lewis et al had isolated further specimens which looked like CCA.

> Prior to July 1960, the influenza and parainfluenza viruses predominated in infant epidemic respiratory infections. In July 1961 the pattern changed abruptly with sudden increases in bronchiolitis and bronchitis, infrequent before. 58% were under 12 months, and patients under 4 years predominated. Infants with bronchiolitis and severe bronchitis yielded RCA not previously isolated. Deaths have occurred.

Many of the research papers said it was likely that the initial chimpanzee virus was the result of an infection passed to the troop by a human.

However, within five years of the discovery of this virus in chimpanzees, children went from predominantly being hospitalised by influenza to hospitalisation due to bronchitis linked to RSV.

Now, approximately one half of all infants become infected with RSV in their first year of life, almost all of them by the age of two. In the US alone, hospitalisation of children with RSV costs $300 million.

So there are two theories, one that the virus passed from a human to the chimps and the other that it passed from the chimps to humans. However, the fact that this virus was unknown in humans before the chimp got ill and within five years the predominant illness in children flipped from influenza to RSV suggests that the latter theory is correct.