

March 9, 2023

The Honorable Michael Burgess, MD
U.S. House of Representatives
2161 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6115

Subject: Response to Questions for the Record, E&C Subcommittee on O&I

Dear Congressman Burgess,

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations. You are undertaking vital work by directing Congressional attention to the Challenges and Opportunities of Investigating the Origins of Pandemics and Other Biological Threats.

After the 2001 Anthrax letter attacks, new programs were established for microbial forensics, and the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (NBACC) was designed and constructed to support biological attribution. Unfortunately, while the complexity of biological threats has rapidly expanded since 2001, attention to the challenges of biological attribution over the last decade has been insufficient.

Addressing these complex and novel biological threats requires that we reimagine our approach to develop capacities to investigate natural and unnatural (accidental or deliberate) outbreaks for attribution. Importantly, this requires much closer coordination between public health, law enforcement, and the intelligence community.

Whether natural, accidental, or deliberate, we must do everything we can to rapidly determine the source of a community outbreak, epidemic, or pandemic. This is essential to prevent a future recurrence and to mitigate continued disease transmission once a novel pathogen emerges. Biological attribution is an essential component of our preparedness and response enterprise.

Question 1. What can Congress do to promote increased interagency coordination when investigating serious public health incidents?

Answer. As I stated in my written testimony, current multilateral agreements and organizations, such as the World Health Organization, have inherent weaknesses that limit their ability to investigate and attribute biological threats in member states around the world unless invited in by member states to provide technical assistance. This is not a criticism of the World Health Organization. Rather, in the case of COVID-19, it is a criticism of the Chinese Communist Party for silencing Chinese scientists and not permitting a comprehensive, transparent, multilateral investigation to assess the natural origin and research associated hypotheses with forensic rigor alongside Chinese scientists, that can be independently verified.

But as we look beyond COVID-19 and the need to establish new capabilities and procedures in the United States to investigate and attribute outbreaks at home or abroad, we must first take action to galvanize interagency governance structures to enable effective policy leadership, coordination, collaboration, and innovation. This must also be accomplished in a manner that does not impede effective implementation and management of programs at department/agency levels.

I testified previously before the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs and the United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications about the importance of interagency leadership, governance, and capabilities needed for attribution (Parker, 2022) (Parker, 2017). My comments in those testimonies are still relevant for Congressional consideration today.

The 2022 PREVENT Pandemics Act provides new authority for the administration to establish a White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy. This is an important development. If implemented well, it could address interagency policy coordination and related issues I discussed in my previous testimonies, which others have highlighted. However, it is unclear how the administration plans to implement this new authority and how current domestic and international preparedness and response policies, global health security, and the new National Strategy for Biodefense will be consolidated under this new office. It is also unclear how much authority the new office will have in practice. Will the Departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Agriculture, Homeland Security, State, and Justice, the Intelligence Community, and other departments support and believe this new office has the authority to coordinate and direct resources on priority requirements during the annual budget process on behalf of the President?

The 2022 National Biodefense Strategy calls for strengthening national attribution capacity for natural and unnatural infectious disease outbreaks. The strategy places leadership with the Department of Health and Human Services and the Federal Bureau of Investigation with support from the Departments of Interior, Agriculture, Energy, Homeland Security, State, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Intelligence Community. The range of agencies and disciplines involved will require strong interagency coordination and leadership.

The complexity of 21st century biological threats will challenge our ability to distinguish natural from unnatural sources, at least initially. Thus, the starting assumptions of any suspicious infectious disease outbreak domestically or internationally should include the possibilities of natural or unnatural origins until proven otherwise, requiring much closer coordination between public health, law enforcement, diplomatic and scientific agencies, and the intelligence community. As I mentioned in my written testimony, public health authorities do not reflexively consider unnatural origins.

Regarding Congressional action, in my experience and professional expertise, there are two gaps that require immediate consideration.

First, biological attribution is not highlighted as a specific priority in the PREVENT Pandemics Act.

This gap in the PREVENT Pandemics Act must be closed in the Pandemic, and All-Hazards Preparedness Act scheduled to be reauthorized in 2023.

Second, Congressional action is warranted to provide oversight, or additional legislation, if necessary, to ensure the new White House Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy is implemented in a manner that provides effective interagency governance, coordination, and leadership for the entire interagency biodefense, global health security, and pandemic preparedness and response enterprise, domestically and internationally. This must include oversight to ensure that the administration implements new programs required to establish capacities for biological attribution and to ensure effective governance and coordination mechanisms are put in place to optimize the investigative authorities, expertise, and laboratory capabilities of relevant agencies to determine the source of infectious disease outbreaks rapidly.

2. In your professional experience, could we have known the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic by March 2020? A simple yes or no answer.

Answer. Yes

Respectively,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerald W Parker, PhD". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "G" and a stylized "P".

Gerald W Parker, DVM, PhD

References

Parker, G. (2017, November 7). *How effective is the Department of Homeland Security's Science and Technology Directorate?* Retrieved from Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications:
<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM12/20171107/106557/HHRG-115-HM12-Wstate-ParkerG-20171107.pdf>

Parker, G. (2022, February 17). *Addressing the Gaps in America's Biosecurity Preparedness.* Retrieved from Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs:
<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/imo/media/doc/Testimony-Parker-2022-02-17.pdf>