

Wuhan: Chinese laboratory that first shared coronavirus genome with world ordered to close for ‘rectification’, hindering its Covid-19 research

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- **No reason was given for the closure of Shanghai facility, which released information about the virus ahead of authorities**
- **One source at the laboratory said the closure has hampered scientists’ research when they should be ‘racing against the clock’**

The Shanghai laboratory where researchers published the world’s first genome sequence of the deadly coronavirus that causes Covid-19 has been shut down.

The laboratory at the Shanghai Public Health Clinical Centre was ordered to close for “rectification” on January 12, a day after Professor Zhang Yongzhen’s team published the genome sequence on open platforms. It closed temporarily the following day.

The release of the data helped researchers develop test kits for the virus.

“The centre was not given any specific reasons why the laboratory was closed for rectification. [We have submitted] four reports [asking for permission] to reopen but we have not received any replies,” a source with the centre said, requesting anonymity because of the matter’s sensitivity.

“The closure has greatly affected the scientists and their research when they should be racing against the clock to find the means to help put the novel coronavirus outbreak under control,” the source said.

The laboratory is a Level 3 biosafety facility, the second highest level, and passed an annual inspection by the China National Accreditation Service for Conformity Assessment on January 5. It also obtained the required credentials to conduct research on the coronavirus on January 24.

It was not clear whether the closure was related to the publishing of the sequencing data before the authorities.

The closure order was issued by the Shanghai Health Commission. Five telephone calls to officials at the commission seeking comment on the closure were not picked up. A fax sent to the commission requesting comment was not answered.

China’s National Health Commission announced hours after the release by Zhang’s team that it would share the genome sequence with the World Health Organisation. It later emerged that the information had been sent through the officially designated Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Zhang's team isolated and finished the genome sequence of the then-unknown virus on January 5, two days before China's official announcement that mysterious pneumonia cases in Wuhan were caused by a hitherto unknown coronavirus.

The Shanghai centre reported its discovery to the National Health Commission on the same day and recommended "relevant prevention and control measures" be taken in public places, because the patient from whom the sample was collected had suffered very severe symptoms and the virus resembled a group previously found in bats.

The team made the finding public on January 11 after it saw that the authorities had taken no obvious action to warn the public about the coronavirus.

At the time, the public was told that no new cases had been reported in Wuhan since January 3 and there was no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission.

"It was not about any individual's achievements. It's about having biological test kits ready in face of a previously unknown respiratory disease, especially when a large part of the population [was] moving [across the country] during the Lunar New Year holidays," said a source close to Zhang's team, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

It shared the data on virological.org, an open platform for discussions, and GenBank, an open-access data repository, and said researchers were welcome to download, share, use and analyse the data.

Within a week of its publication, several companies in China announced that they had developed diagnosis kits for the virus.

The findings by Zhang's team were published in the scientific journal Nature on February 3. The research said the virus sample was collected from a patient who showed symptoms of fever, dizziness and coughing and was admitted to a Wuhan hospital on December 26.

The Shanghai centre has a long-term cooperation relationship with Wuhan Central Hospital. The patient was identified as a 41-year-old male vendor who worked at the Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market in Wuhan, which was believed to be a key link of infections at the early stage of the outbreak.

The lab's closure not only affected Zhang's research but also studies by other scientists since it is an open facility, according to another researcher with knowledge of the matter.

"There have been applications from research institutes and universities to try drugs and compare the effects of different treatment and the development of vaccines, but [all these will have] to be turned down. Closing down the laboratory also affects the studying of the virus," the researcher said.

Zhuang Pinghui, in Beijing

P.S.

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3052966/chinese-laboratory-first-shared-coronavir>

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