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We must have a virus inquiry



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World deserves clear answers on how and where COVID started

Journalists over the years have generally been trained to avoid conspiracy theories.

Not just to be suspicious, but to recognise them and ensure they get no oxygen.

So it wasn't that surprising that internet rumours in February about the coronavirus pandemic emanating from a Chinese Government laboratory at ground zero — Wuhan in Hubei province — were discounted.

I remember discussing it with a senior political contact who later sent me a link to a report in the journal Nature Medicine which probed the origins of the causative SARS COV-2 virus and deemed "improbable" that it emerged through laboratory manipulation.

The strongest element of the rumours was that the Wuhan Institute of Virology is only hundreds of metres from the infamous wet market which the Chinese authorities were blaming as the cause of the outbreak.

Some of the more florid stories doing the rounds claimed that laboratory technicians sold to the market discarded animals on which experiments had been performed.

But could anyone prove it? And how to even investigate it from Australia?

In the meantime, US President Donald Trump had a field day blaming the Chinese for originating the virus and last week claimed "more and more we're hearing the story" about the laboratory link.

That comment prompted an official response from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating the World Health Organisation had repeatedly said there was no evidence showing the virus was made in a lab.

However, the conspiracy theory was kicked ahead last week when The Washington

Post — Trump's media nemesis — reported that American diplomats in China sent cables home in January 2018 warning the Wuhan institute was "conducting risky studies on coronaviruses from bats".

The report said that after repeated visits to the laboratory by US officials, one cable specifically said work on bat coronaviruses and their potential human transmission represented a risk of a new SARS-like pandemic.

"The cable tells us that there have long been concerns about the possibility of the threat to public health that came from this lab's research, if it was not being adequately conducted and protected," Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at the School of Information at the University of California, told the newspaper.

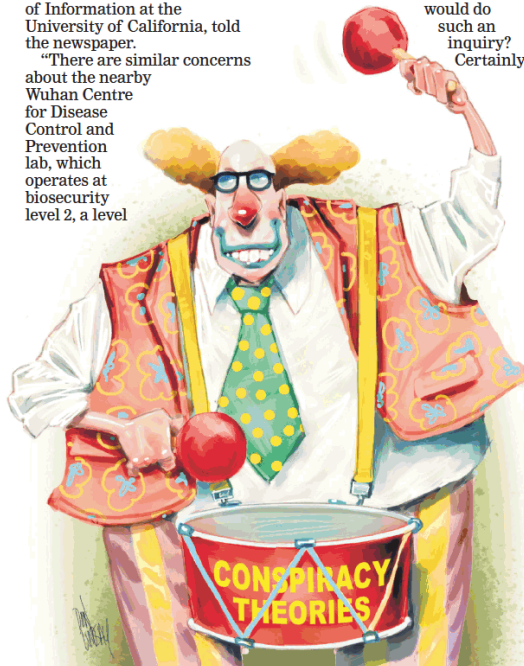
"There are similar concerns about the nearby Wuhan Centre for Disease Control and Prevention lab, which operates at biosecurity level 2, a level

significantly less secure than the level-4 standard claimed by the Wuhan Institute of Virology lab".

And then the newspaper made this telling point: "That's important because the Chinese Government still refuses to answer basic questions about the origin of the novel coronavirus while suppressing any attempts to examine whether either lab was involved."

This week, Australia joined the Trump concerns with Foreign Minister Marise Payne adding her weight to international calls for an independent inquiry into the virus' origins and how it was allowed to spread.

But who would do such an inquiry? Certainly



A real inquiry will be central to an international understanding of the ongoing dangers of the virus.

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Suspicious bosses are making the WFH world even harder

Just a few weeks ago, bosses around the country moved to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by shutting office doors and sending millions of Australians to work from home, hoping it would be business as usual.

However, it is not business as usual and many bosses have been left to wallow in worry that WFH is less productive.

In other words, their concern is that we slack off when we WFH. Combine that with their lack of experience in managing remote teams and many bosses are left more exasperated than an adolescent being home-schooled.

GARY MARTIN



The frustration is starting to manifest itself in homes around the country with bosses turning up the heat on those who WFH. Some bosses have asked employees to keep their webcams on throughout the day. Others are hounding workers with phone calls on the hour — every hour — to ensure progress is being made.

Other bosses are bombarding workers with texts and emails — labelled urgent — that if not

answered as quick as a flash are followed up by directives to attend immediate videoconferences.

More concerning, some bosses are deploying surveillance programs to monitor and analyse keystroke activity of employees logged into laptops via company networks.

Already facing challenges as they attempt to pivot from their office cubicle to the kitchen table, being told to be as productive as possible makes many workers feel like they are required to work 24/7 — or risk losing their job.

Workers remain entitled to

take breaks when WFH. Those breaks may well extend to taking the dog for a walk, watering the garden or throwing on a load of washing.

If we are brutally honest, it is not so much the relaxed worker at home who purges productivity but those who try to micromanage us remotely. You would assume, for example, a competent boss would have hired staff who could work independently without having to be in ear or eye shot.

In these tough COVID-19 times, a bit of managerial empathy would also go a long way along with the most effective boss focusing more on

an individual's output than their input.

You would also expect the boss to understand that an hour worked by one employee is not the same as an hour worked by another, even if they have the same job description.

Smart bosses who set clear goals for what employees should get done in a week, a month or even a quarter — and regularly check in on progress — do not need to be suspicious of what those of us WFH are really spending our time on.

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