

Scientists: Search for COVID origin stalls

Window for inquiry into Wuhan laboratory said to be ‘closing fast’

Maria Cheng ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON – The international scientists dispatched to China by the World Health Organization to find out where the coronavirus came from said Wednesday the search has stalled and warned that the window of opportunity for solving the mystery is “closing fast.”

Meanwhile, a U.S. intelligence review ordered by President Joe Biden proved inconclusive about the virus’s origin, including whether it jumped from an animal to a human or escaped from a Chinese lab, The Washington Post reported Wednesday.

In a commentary published in the journal Nature, the WHO-recruited experts said the origins investigation is at “a critical juncture” requiring urgent collaboration but has instead come to a standstill. They noted among other things that Chinese officials are still reluctant to share some raw data, citing concerns over patient confidentiality.

Earlier this year, WHO sent a team of experts to Wuhan, where the first human COVID-19 cases were detected in December 2019, to probe what might have triggered the pandemic now blamed for nearly 4.5 million deaths worldwide, with more than 10,000 people a day succumbing despite more than 5 billion doses of vaccine administered.

In their analysis, published in March, the WHO team concluded the virus probably jumped to humans from animals, and they described the possibility of a laboratory leak as “extremely unlikely.”

But the WHO experts said their report was intended only as a first step and added, “The window of opportunity for conducting this crucial inquiry is closing fast: any delay will render some of the studies biologically impossible.”

For example, they said, “Antibodies wane, so collecting further samples and testing people who might have been exposed before December 2019 will yield diminishing returns.”

China said Wednesday that officials should “con-



Fu Cong, a Foreign Ministry director general, accused the United States on Wednesday of politicizing the search for COVID-19’s origins. NG HAN GUAN/AP

centrate on other possible avenues that may help trace the origin” of COVID-19 and suggested studies should be pursued in other countries.

Fu Cong, a director-general in China’s Foreign Ministry, agreed it was a “pity” the search for COVID-19’s origins had stalled but said it wasn’t China’s fault. “China has always supported and will continue to participate in the science-based origin tracing efforts,” he said.

He accused the U.S. of “hyping the lab leak theory” and trying to shift the blame onto China, and implied the coronavirus might be linked to high-level American research labs, suggesting the United States invite WHO to investigate some of its installations.

Marion Koopmans and her WHO-recruited colleagues listed a number of priorities for further research, including conducting wider antibody surveys that might identify places where COVID-19 was spreading undetected, both in China and beyond, testing wild bats and farm-raised animals as potential res-

ervoirs of the virus, and investigating any credible new leads.

Some other scientists fear the best opportunities to collect samples might have been missed during the first few weeks after some of the earliest human cases appeared linked to a Wuhan seafood market.

Chinese researchers collected hundreds of environmental samples immediately after the coronavirus was found, but it is unclear how many people or animals were tested.

“Once you have wildlife traders shifting over to other kinds of employment because they’re worried about whether they’ll be able to do this anymore, that window starts to close,” said Maciej Boni, a Pennsylvania State University biology professor who has studied virus origins and was not part of the WHO team.

Still, Boni said scientists might be able to pinpoint COVID-19’s animal source by hunting for closely related viruses in species like raccoon dogs, mink or ground squirrels. But he said it could take about five years.

Pfizer seeking FDA approval for booster shot

Tom Murphy ASSOCIATED PRESS

Pfizer is seeking U.S. approval of a booster dose of its two-shot COVID-19 vaccine.

The drugmaker said Wednesday that it started the application process for a third dose of its vaccine for people ages 16 and older. The company said it will complete the application with the Food and Drug Administration by the end of this week.

The company’s move follows an announcement by U.S. health officials last week of plans to give COVID-19 booster shots to all Americans to shore up protection amid the surging delta variant of the virus. Officials said it’s “very clear” that the vaccines’ protection against COVID-19 infections wanes.

Pfizer’s vaccine received full FDA approval earlier this week; it had been used since last December under an emergency use authorization.

The three vaccines used in the U.S. made by Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson are still preventing hospitalizations and deaths from COVID-19. But the vaccines don’t appear quite as strong against the highly contagious delta variant as they were against earlier versions of the virus.

Earlier this month, U.S. regulators said transplant recipients or others with weakened immune systems can get an extra dose of Pfizer or Moderna vaccines.

BLUE ZONES PROJECT - SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

September is Healthy Aging Month: Celebrate Okinawan Style

By Sebastien Saitta

“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made. Our times are in his hand who saith, ‘A whole I planned, youth shows but half; Trust God: See all, nor be afraid!’” Nineteenth century English Poet, Robert Browning’s celebratory vision of old age in his poem “Rabbi Ben Ezra” rarely finds its way around these days. In a world of Botox, supplements, skin tightening serums, face lifts, tucks, and photo filters promising to turn back the hands of time, it is evident that most of us struggle to come to terms with aging. We all want to live longer, but we don’t want to get older.

Despite all the fighting back with billions of dollars spent on anti-aging each year, it’s time to face reality. Nature always wins in the long run. It has all the time in the world. We don’t. Wrinkles begin to show, hair will gray, and joints start to stiffen up among other so-called harsh realities that come with getting older. While this inevitable truth is tough to accept for many, perhaps it’s time to take a page out of the Okinawan playbook.

In Okinawa, Japan, one of five Blue Zones in the world where people live the longest and healthiest, age is something to be celebrated rather than feared. So much so that even the country of Japan as a whole designated a public holiday known as Respect for the Aged Day. Celebrated on the third Monday of every September, the government presents a commemorative sake cup to those who have turned 100 in the past year. There is a lot of celebrating to do as 2020 data from the Japanese government shows that there were 80,450 people aged 100 that year. There is even an Okinawan village called Kitanakagusuku that

holds a yearly pageant to honor women aged 80 and older.

So what exactly is the longevity secret that draws celebration from an entire country? According to National Geographic research and Blue Zones founder, Dan Buettner, there are nine principles. These principles are shared by all five Blue Zones and are known as the Power 9®. Okinawans have a unique saying to support several of these principles and can be followed no matter your geographical location.

Ikigai

Pronounced ee-kee-guy, this saying roughly translates as “the reason you get up in the morning.” Okinawans keep busy discovering and doing things that give their life meaning or purpose. According to Buettner, focusing on your purpose can add up to seven good years to your life. He notes that the year one retires can also be one of the most dangerous because of the sudden lack of purpose that they experience. Blue Zones Project offers Purpose Workshops for residents of Southwest Florida to help discover their strengths and talents, and offers ways to share that with the world no matter what stage they are in life.

Moai

Moai (mo-eye) is a term that means meeting for a common purpose. Women in Okinawa (who make up for 88% of the centenarian population) often get together in groups to talk about life, gossip, or share advice. This serves as a social support group where they feel cared for. They simply enjoy each other’s company. This helps keep stress levels low while enhancing feel-good chemicals in the brain that support overall health. Some of these groups were even paired

as young children when the commitment was made for their entire life.

To date, Blue Zones Project has had more than 4,500 people that have participated in a walking or a potluck group, also known as a Moai®.

Hara Hachi Bu

Okinawans use this term to remind them to stop eating when they are 80% full. This goes a long way in the prevention of overeating and unnecessary weight gain. Since it typically takes 20 minutes for our brain to receive the signal from our stomach that we’re full, it usually turns out that when you think you’re 80% full, you’re actually full. Ways that help Okinawans practice this include eating mindfully, and also being in the company of others to allow for conversation in between bites.

Brought to Southwest Florida by NCH Healthcare System, in collaboration with Sharecare, Inc., Blue Zones Project is a vital part of Southwest Florida’s well-being improvement initiative that encourages changes in the community that lead to healthier options. For more information about Blue Zones Project Southwest Florida, visit southwestflorida.bluezonesproject.com.

