



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-TX)

Investigations & Oversight Subcommittee Hearing:
Principles for Outbreak Investigation: COVID-19 and Future Infectious Diseases

July 14, 2021

Good afternoon to our witnesses and thank you for joining us here today.

As we all know, the global pandemic has ravaged our communities and demanded the attention of this country for the past 18 months. We have all dedicated our efforts to weathering this storm. Thanks to the tireless work of the medical community, and the vaccines they have developed, we can finally see the light at the end of the tunnel, although it is too soon to relax our vigilance given the emergence of variants.

We now have the opportunity to examine the lessons to be learned from this terrible experience. In particular, by developing principles for how best to investigate the origins of COVID-19, we can prepare for and possibly prevent the next pandemic.

Debate over COVID-19's origins has spread far beyond the sphere of science into the realms of national politics and international geopolitics. People without scientific expertise or firsthand knowledge have dominated the discussion. Scientists on all sides of the debate have hesitated to speak out in fear of threats or other negative public reactions. Let me say right now how harmful and destructive this kind of behavior is to the scientific process specifically. If anything, it is making it harder for scientists to get to the truth.

Science communicators have also struggled. The nuances of this scientific debate have not been communicated to the public in a particularly clear way. New scientific evidence that emerged was quickly cited as an argument in favor of one theory or the other, without being put into proper context. Public understanding of the origins of COVID-19 is cloudier today than it was a year ago.

The question of the origins of COVID-19 will not be settled here today, and that is not the purpose of today's hearing. The famous Texan epidemiologist Patricia Buffler once said: "The work of epidemiology is related to unanswered questions, but also to unquestioned answers." By asking questions about how an investigation of the origins of COVID-19 should be conducted, we will improve our approach to outbreak investigation in the future. We will affirm stronger principles for international health data sharing and transparency. And we can take a fresh

approach to addressing safety concerns in laboratories that conduct genomic engineering and gain-of-function research of concern.

The possibility of an animal origin for COVID-19 tells us that we must cast a wider net with our animal disease surveillance. Similarly, the possibility of a laboratory leak means that there is work to be done to improve laboratory biosafety.

With this hearing, the Science Committee intends to recenter the discussion around data-driven investigations and the expertise of scientists. We will rely on our expert panel of witness to ground the discussion within the realm of reason. And, most importantly, we will seek to learn about how best to investigate the origins of the disease so we can prepare for the inevitable disease outbreaks of the future.

Thank you and I yield back.