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Chair: Mr. Ken Hardie



Special Committee on the Canada–People’s Republic of China Relationship

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• (1300)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ken Hardie (Fleetwood—Port Kells, Lib.)):
I'd like to call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 38 of the House of Commons Special Committee on the Canada–People's Republic of China Relationship.

Pursuant to the order of reference of May 16, 2022, the committee is meeting on its study of the Canada–People's Republic of China Relations.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. If you are participating by video conference, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please mute yourself when you're not speaking.

For interpretation for those on Zoom, you have the choice, at the bottom of your screen—it's that little globe icon—of floor audio, English or French. Those in the room, of course, can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

I will remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

Members in the room, if you wish to speak, raise your hand. Of course, we have a speaking order, so I think that's going to be okay. Members on Zoom and especially our witnesses, if there is something that you would like to add to the discussion, please use the “raise hand” function so that we can recognize you. It quite often happens that we're asking questions of one person and somebody else has something very valuable to add, so use that “raise hand” function as you will in order to draw the attention of the chair and the clerk. We'll try to do our best to keep the speaking order as tight as possible.

As per the motion adopted on March 26, 2024, we're hearing testimony in relation to matters revealed in the Winnipeg lab documents.

Looking at our roster here, around the table, I want to welcome Ms. Idlout in place of Ms. McPherson, Mr. Cooper for Ms. Lantsman, Dr. Ellis for MP Seeback, Mr. Iacono for MP Oliphant, and MP Villemure for MP Bergeron.

Welcome to all of you.

From the Department of Health, we have Dr. Stephen Lucas, deputy minister, by video conference; and Nadine Huggins, assistant deputy minister and chief security officer, corporate services branch. From the Public Health Agency of Canada, we have Heather Jeffrey, president; Dr. Guillaume Poliquin, vice-president, national microbiology laboratory, by video conference; and Donald Sheppard, vice-president, infectious diseases and vaccination programs branch, by video conference.

I understand that Ms. Jeffrey is the one with an opening statement.

Ms. Jeffrey, the floor is yours for up to five minutes.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey (President, Public Health Agency of Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, for the opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss the documents tabled in Parliament on February 28 related to the termination of two scientists at the national microbiology laboratory in 2021.

This is a very important discussion. The mandate of the Public Health Agency is to promote and protect the health of Canadians, and the national microbiology lab is an essential tool in that work. During the COVID pandemic, the work of the lab in rapidly developing diagnostic tests, genomic sequencing, waste-water surveillance, modelling and research into medical countermeasures was critical to Canada's response then and also to our ability to face future health threats.

The Public Health Agency of Canada takes its accountability to Parliament and to Canadians very seriously. The agency has fully supported the work of a panel of arbiters in their deliberations to review the redactions in the package of documents tabled by the Minister of Health.

Every day our employees work with integrity to protect and promote the health of Canadians. We not only expect but also require our employees to abide by the code of conduct, as well as the Values and Ethics Code for the Public Sector.

• (1305)

[Translation]

As the committee has heard from previous witnesses, the global threat environment is constantly evolving. Canada's excellence in research science is underpinned by collaboration. However, we know that science is also of interest to actors seeking economic and technological advantage.

[English]

Since these events took place, our security posture and policies have been strengthened and adapted. This cannot be a static effort. Processes have been put in place to ensure that our posture is continually reassessed, in line with the evolving risks, in order to ensure that we remain fully prepared to address them, not only now but also in the future.

[Translation]

The package of documents tabled in Parliament reflects the results of an administrative investigation initiated in 2019 into the activities and subsequent termination of employment of two scientists at PHAC's National Microbiology Lab. At that time, research security concerns were also referred to the appropriate law enforcement authorities for investigation.

[English]

The investigation showed that the two individuals clearly failed to disclose and, in fact, took steps to conceal important information about their activities and affiliations from their employer, including their work with China. Their failure to follow security protocols and their failure to disclose their collaborations led to their suspension, the revocation of their security clearances and, ultimately, their dismissal. As of January 20, 2021, the two scientists were no longer employed by the Public Health Agency.

The NML has always operated as a secured facility. However, the administrative investigation initiated in 2019 highlighted that the policies and procedures in place at the time needed to be further strengthened, along with measures to ensure compliance and mitigate the risks posed by the current threat environment.

[Translation]

In response, the Public Health Agency of Canada has invested significant time and attention to ensure research and science policies have a renewed focus on security.

[English]

Specific physical, personnel, cyber and operational security measures have been updated, while also galvanizing an institutional culture that recognizes the responsibility to ensure full awareness and implementation of these measures in light of the important work of the NML and the ever-shifting threat landscape. This is consistent with efforts across the Government of Canada to support innovation and research while also protecting national security. The development by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada of national security guidelines for research partnerships and identification of sensitive research areas are recent examples of this work.

PHAC complies fully with biosecurity regulations, the Human Pathogens and Toxins Act and the transportation of dangerous goods program, and works closely with regulatory bodies to ensure ongoing compliance. All international collaborations require review from a security perspective, and governance is in place to vet and approve new collaborations. This includes the mandatory use of material transfer agreements as well as formal agreements to structure collaborations—such as collaborative research agreements—and a strengthened policy on affiliations with academic, research

and health care organizations as part of a suite of additional scientific integrity policies.

[Translation]

PHAC has established clear and regular training and communication on security and employee accountabilities.

The National Microbiology Lab has a renewed, proactive security posture that has reinforced the physical security of the building. Screening measures are strictly enforced for all staff and external visitors, including the requirement for visitors to be accompanied at all times and without exception.

[English]

The processes and policies that are in place will continue to be evaluated and enhanced with a view to continuously protecting the confidence and trust of Canadians in our work.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Jeffrey.

I understand that we have a technical issue with one of the monitors in the room, so we're going to suspend for a moment. It has to be unplugged and plugged back in again. That works for a lot of things, and hopefully it will work this time. We are suspended for a minute.

- (1305) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1310)

The Chair: We're back in session.

We begin with our first round of questions. MP Chong, you have six minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for appearing again in front of our committee, Ms. Jeffrey.

Reports some time ago suggested that Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng could sue the Government of Canada, so my first question is, can you confirm that there are no legal proceedings that have been initiated by either Drs. Qiu or Cheng against the Government of Canada?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm in a position to confirm that they filed a complaint with the National Security and Intelligence Review Agency with regard to the suspension of their clearances.

Hon. Michael Chong: To your knowledge, is that the extent of any proceedings they have initiated?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: As far as I'm aware....

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

One of the things we're trying to understand at the committee is why it took 10 months for the lab to be secured and 10 months between the discovery of a patent improperly registered in the People's Republic of China and July 5, 2019, when the two scientists were escorted out of the lab. My questions are framed in that light, trying to understand why it took 10 months, so my first question is, when did the Minister of Health and her office first become aware of the national security breaches at the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: My understanding is that the Minister of Health was briefed at different junctures in the investigation, so as to be informed of decisions that were being taken by the deputy head of the agency in line with the administrative investigations—as examples, in June 2019 on the results of the fact-finding investigation, in August 2020 on the suspension of the employees, and in January 2021 on their firing.

Hon. Michael Chong: Were the minister's office or the minister made aware before June 2019?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: My understanding is that they were briefed periodically. I don't have specific dates.

Hon. Michael Chong: Can you get back to the committee and let us know when the minister and her office were first made aware of this issue at the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, we will look back at the records and—

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

When did the president of the agency, your predecessor, first become aware of these national security breaches at the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: My understanding is that the initial briefings led to some identification by the security branch of the health portfolio and that the opening of the fact-finding investigation was subsequently authorized. I don't have the specific date that the president was briefed on this, but the security branch did launch, with the president of the agency, that fact-finding investigation in December 2018.

Hon. Michael Chong: The reason I ask this, Madam Jeffrey, is that the role of the president, the responsibilities of the president and the authorities of the president are to grant security clearances and oversee the classification of employees and the access of those employees to the lab. Could you let the clerk of the committee know when the president first became aware of these breaches? It's material to that person's responsibility to ensure that security clearances are appropriate at the lab.

The president of PHAC exited her role as president of PHAC on February 27, 2019. A new deputy head was not appointed until May 6 of that year, so there was a period of about 10 weeks in which there was no president of PHAC.

My first question is this: Was there an interim or an acting president of PHAC during that period, from the end of February to the beginning of May 2019?

• (1315)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: As is normal, our interim president would be appointed with delegation during that period.

Hon. Michael Chong: What was that role? Was it an ADM, or was it a director general? Who was the acting president during that period?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The acting president during that period was the chief public health officer.

Hon. Michael Chong: Did the chief public health officer have the delegated authority over security clearances for the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The policy on delegation resides with the deputy head; however, the approval of individual clearances is delegated to the chief security officer of the agency.

Hon. Michael Chong: The delegation to the chief security officer wasn't just for that interregnum; it's generally delegated at all times.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, given the volume and the size of the agency, the day-to-day decision-making on security clearances resides with the chief security officer.

Hon. Michael Chong: When did the chief security officer first become aware of the national security issues at the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: My understanding is that in August 2018, subsequent to a briefing that was given for general awareness by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the potential concerns regarding the vulnerability of lab employees to potential influence were flagged to the service, and fact-finding began. In September, potential issues began to be identified, and the chief security officer was involved in those discussions.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now go to Mr. Fragiskatos for six minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here.

Just to clear some things up from previous meetings and to ensure the record is correct, were the scientists in question agents of the Chinese state, or were they in fact Canadian?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The scientists in question were Canadian citizens, long-standing employees of the lab, and respected in their field of scientific effort.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

Was the shipment of live Ebola and henipavirus to the Wuhan Institute authorized?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, the shipment to the Wuhan Institute was authorized, as per the standard procedures of the lab. The procedures around its transit were in full compliance with the relevant act and with biosafety regulations.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: You've answered my next question, which was about whether all of this went through the necessary checks, so thank you very much.

Were there any unauthorized shipments or any removal of pathogens from the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Mr. Chair, we have a very rigorous procedure to audit and account for all the pathogens and toxins at the lab, and we are 100% certain that there were no unauthorized removals of high-consequence pathogens or toxins from the lab environment at any time.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Ms. Jeffrey.

In your testimony, you went over steps that have been taken to ensure best practices going forward. Could you reiterate the key or signature advances that have been made to ensure best practices now and in the future?

• (1320)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

There are five main areas of program improvements to security that we made at the lab.

First, around physical security, we have tightened physical security screening measures. We've installed a modernized access control system; we've enhanced radio surveillance and monitoring, and we have strict protocols for delivery and shipping.

We have improved our IMIT information technology to guard against cyber-risks. We have comprehensive threat risk assessments, new procedures for information and travel, and completed updates to key functions.

We have a new policy on affiliations, a new updated approach to student hiring, and strict requirements and new structures for governance and approval, including a science security committee, enhanced incident response and monitoring protocols, compliance monitoring and requirements for declarations of conflicts of interest and affiliations.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much. It's quite thorough.

How were these introduced? Whom was it done in consultation with?

I'm just trying to understand how exactly decisions were arrived at: how you made the decisions to go in this particular direction, who advised, and these kinds of things.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In response to any incidents, including the ones identified in this case, we work with national security, law enforcement and public safety personnel, as well as with our chief security officer in the branch, to identify improvements to protocols and procedures that will help prevent or provide early warning for any such instances in the future.

It's really important to review these constantly, given the evolving nature of security threats, and to maintain our investments—not just physical updates, but also extensive programs for training and employee awareness—because these measures are strengthened by a culture in which one is not only aware but fully compliant with the measures that are in place. We have expended energy on both of these fronts.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I understand.

You just mentioned employee awareness. Can you go into what is done to ensure as much employee awareness as possible in the context, as you say, of ever-evolving threats?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: We've implemented mandatory training to raise awareness and provide guidance on the security responsibilities and accountabilities of all staff and security personnel at all levels. We've enhanced our onboarding and departure procedures. We have clear and regular communication in writing and through town halls and other measures in terms of security and conflicts of interest, and regular updates to those processes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: To what extent is the organization engaged in the international context and with counterpart organizations, either the Five Eyes or the G7?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: International collaboration in this field is key to success. There is a limited set of international counterparts that work in this field and that have labs at the level that Canada does.

We are in constant contact with them, as are our national security and law enforcement personnel, to compare our security posture, to share enhancements and to ensure that we are keeping pace with the evolving nature of the global situation.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure (Trois-Rivières, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Villemure.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Excuse me, but I can't hear Ms. Jeffrey's answers. She's speaking softly at the end of her sentences. The volume goes down and she's mumbling a bit, so I can't hear her.

Could she speak more loudly or more clearly?

[English]

The Chair: Yes. If I was back in my old drill as a radio program director, I'd be talking to you about mic technique.

Make sure you speak up consistently. That's lovely. Thank you.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll move it closer.

The Chair: All right.

Mr. Villemure, the next six minutes are yours.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for being here with us today, Ms. Jeffrey.

In a few words, since time is limited, how is it that this series of events could have happened?

• (1325)

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would say that we have quite strict security procedures and processes in place.

In this particular situation, we were dealing with two employees—Canadian scientists, eminent in their field—who took measures to hide their affiliations and aspects of their work.

It was through awareness and training that the Public Health Agency and the lab personnel at the time identified a potential source of concern and then launched a series of investigations. Those successive investigations uncovered different layers of incidents. First, there were allegations, and then they sought evidence and enlisted—

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

Forgive me for interrupting you at times, but I want to get to the end of my questions.

You've put policies in place since then. However, if I understand correctly, the policies that were already in place weren't followed. Was it a lack of supervision, a lack of oversight or a lack of accountability?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would say we've significantly enhanced our policies, because we are always looking for ways to detect and respond to such cases as early as possible, as well as to keep pace with evolving threats.

In this case, employees were taking active steps to hide their activities and, indeed, made false declarations to the officials throughout their investigation. It was only through the tools available to our security, intelligence and public safety institutions, under their governance and acts, that we were able to uncover the evidence that allowed us to proceed.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

I'm going to pick up on the question my colleague asked you earlier, if I may. He asked you whether the two scientists were Canadian citizens or agents of the Chinese Communist Party.

I'd like to ask you the following question: Could they have been Canadian citizens and agents of the Chinese Communist Party?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, Mr. Chair. In this case, these were indeed Canadian citizens and eminent scientists. However, the investigation shows—and our Canadian Security Intelligence Service colleagues brought forward evidence on this—that they were working on undeclared collaborations with the institute in China. For this reason, they were terminated.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Did the investigations lead to the conclusion that they were agents of the Chinese Communist Party, members of the Chinese military?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The investigations brought forward, including the reports that were tabled in Parliament from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, showed they were engaged in discussions with the thousand talents program in China and other talent programs that were incompatible with their status at the lab, and that they lied to cover these activities.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: So if we cut through the metaphors, we can understand that the answer is yes, correct?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Again, I think the documents speak for themselves in terms of the activities they outlined that the scientists engaged in that were undeclared.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: When you first became aware of the problem, you asked an outside firm, Security Consulting, to conduct an investigation. Why was the private sector directly involved, and not CSIS, for example, which conducted a second investigation?

Why didn't you turn to our intelligence service rather than an outside firm?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In this case, Mr. Chair, we pursued a number of different avenues in parallel.

Initially, it was the security branch of the health portfolio that conducted some initial fact-finding, for example, uncovering the patent in September 2018 that launched the subsequent investigations.

There are areas of the investigation that are administrative in nature. At the same time, our national security counterparts were notified and began their own parallel investigations. However, it is standard practice to ensure the independence of the investigation and full dedicated focus on it to contract with external agencies who have the required expertise to do so, but I would underline that this was in parallel to national security and law enforcement efforts.

• (1330)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

How was Presidia Security Consulting chosen? What were the criteria?

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll maybe turn to our chief security officer to respond to that question.

Ms. Nadine Huggins (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Security Officer, Corporate Services Branch, Department of Health): Normally, there is a standing offer that we rely on for these types of investigations of an administrative nature.

I can certainly come back to the committee with the details around how that particular contract was awarded.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I would appreciate that.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Huggins.

Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Idlout for six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout (Nunavut, NDP): *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.* It's a pleasure to be here.

It's quite concerning as well to hear that the government did not enforce measures or protocols to keep Canadian research and intellectual property secure.

One of my immediate questions is, when these measures or protocols were not enforced by the government, who was it that was not enforcing these measures or protocols?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In this case, there was intellectual property at play. This was the patent that was initially identified at the time. As evidenced in the documents, there were different discussions about whether the intellectual property in question was indeed proprietary or would have been more broadly available. The investigation, however, uncovered evidence of other collaborations that were under way that were undeclared.

The protocols and procedures around the requirements for approving international collaboration agreements were subsequently reinforced. The issues relating to the definition of what constitutes intellectual property have also been reinforced through awareness campaigns and underlined by the management of that office, which has been centralized and strengthened.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik.*

How often does the agency meet with CSIS or other relevant security agencies to improve the operational security of Canada's research facilities?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: At the time of these events, my understanding is that quarterly briefings were taking place with different research institutions, of which the national microbiology lab was one. I would say that in the intervening years, our relationship has become even closer.

The expanded activities of the agency in response to the global pandemic, the importance of the intellectual property and the science related to our vaccines, and indeed many areas of health research require very close collaboration, which has been reflected in the recently launched ISED research security partnership policy. This focuses on the kinds of scientific co-operation that occur throughout the Canadian research community, not only within the Government of Canada or the Public Health Agency, but across the country.

These are the risks and the important scientific value that need to be protected across the country, not only within the labs of the Public Health Agency.

Ms. Lori Idlout: You mentioned in a previous response some of the policies that have changed.

I wonder if you could share with us what has been done over the last five years to improve the resilience of departmental activities from foreign interference.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think the most important activities that have taken place are awareness, employee communications and engagement. Indeed, it was an awareness briefing that raised the risk of these particular cases.

There's the mandatory training and the emphasis on security responsibilities for all of our staff, no matter where they work and at what level, in addition to the physical and, of course, cybersecurity posture that has been enhanced. Both the hardware and the software of how we deal with security have been fundamentally strengthened and improved.

The work of committees like this one is very important in continuing to raise that awareness. We're continuing to adapt our procedures as threats evolve, in line with our consultations with our law enforcement and security counterparts.

• (1335)

Ms. Lori Idlout: What could agencies like yours do? What could you do better to report national security incidents to parliamentarians?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I think there have been a number of structures set up to look at national security issues—the National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians is an example—but also, in this case, the ad hoc committee structure that was struck and the panel of arbiters used a number of different techniques to ensure that information related to national security could be divulged to the maximum extent possible while still protecting what is highly sensitive information. For example, the technique of summarizing key national security information so as not to reveal sensitive information about sources and other issues has been effective in allowing content to be released in some cases while protecting the methods and sources.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We'll now go to Mr. Cooper for five minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper (St. Albert—Edmonton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jeffrey, who did the two scientists, Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng, report to?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm going to turn to my colleague Dr. Poliquin to confirm.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin (Vice-President, National Microbiology Laboratory, Public Health Agency of Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Dr. Qiu reported to Dr. Gary Kobinger, within special pathogens. Dr. Cheng reported to Dr. Grant McClarty, though he had different functions within the lab over his course of employment.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Can you provide the titles of those two individuals?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Dr. Kobinger was chief of special pathogens, and Dr. McClarty was the director of the science technology cores.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Are they both employed at the lab with PHAC today?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Both individuals have taken up other opportunities over the course of the past several years.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Did the 10-week delay by the Prime Minister to appoint a new president of PHAC have an impact on securing the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I can say that we moved forward, Mr. Chair, as expediently as possible with the investigations. Initially, we had circumstances and then had allegations, but given their severity and impact, it was very important to have evidence. As soon as evidence was secured, we moved forward.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I asked you a specific question, respectfully. Did the gap, the 10-week period in which there was no one at the top of PHAC, have an impact on the ability to secure the lab, yes or no?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: No.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Between the time that red flags were first raised about Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng in the fall of 2018 through to the time they were marched out of the lab on July 5, 2019, during that nearly 11-month window, were any restrictions placed upon them in terms of their access to the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm going to turn to my colleague. At the time, the circumstances were still under investigation. I would say that until the Canadian Security Intelligence Service was able to provide evidence that pointed to their willing collaboration, which was undeclared, which would have been in June 2020, there was not evidence of their affiliations with external actors.

• (1340)

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Jeffrey, respectfully, I know you weren't in charge at the time, but I find that astounding. In March 2019, PHAC had a fact-finding report that indicated there had been multiple breaches by Dr. Cheng and Dr. Qiu with respect to security and intellectual property, and that, indeed, they had been, on an

unauthorized basis, collaborating with the PRC, including the People's Liberation Army.

How, at Canada's highest-security lab, a level 4 lab, would they have continued to have unfettered access with PHAC having that information?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Mr. Chair, what I can say is that the evidence of their involvement in the talent programs and foreign associations and some of their travel was not presented to the Public Health Agency until June 30, 2020.

Mr. Michael Cooper: The fact-finding report was presented to PHAC on March 23, 2019, and that report contained all of the things that I just mentioned.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: It's very important, given the seriousness of the allegations, that we have evidence to back up the allegations—

Mr. Michael Cooper: Ms. Jeffrey, it was a fact-finding report. What evidence was needed to say that perhaps it's not a good idea to give two scientists who were working with Beijing on an unauthorized basis, including with the PLA, access to a level 4 lab? I think common sense would indicate they should not have been there after that time.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The administrative investigation that was concluded in the spring of 2019 specifically said that an administrative investigation needed to be launched in order to determine if the allegations that had been raised in the fact-finding were indeed founded. They were still allegations at that point in time, and in July 2019, both employees were placed on leave without pay as a result of that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

It's now Ms. Yip's turn, for five minutes.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for coming on a Friday to speak with us.

Ms. Jeffrey, would there have been an instance in which PHAC would have table-dropped the documents without going through the appropriate vetting process?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The information in these administrative investigations is clearly subject to the Privacy Act. It also includes highly sensitive national security information provided by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. The need to ensure that these documents are disclosed in a protected setting underpinned the redactions that were initially made. There is no circumstance that I'm aware of in which these types of reports would be released unredacted, because of the acts that apply.

Ms. Jean Yip: Ms. Jeffrey, in your opening statement you spoke about a supportive culture. Could you elaborate on that?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Collaboration is at the heart of scientific advancement, particularly in public health research and research into the consequences of these pathogens. We saw this, for example, in the Ebola outbreak in west Africa, in the SARS outbreak in Canada and, most recently, in COVID-19. These examples show that international collaboration is essential in order to advance quickly to keep pace with evolving and mutating viruses.

It's important, while safeguarding the security of these pathogens and toxins, as well as of our science, to be able to collaborate in a secure environment, so it is very important that our personnel understand and work within policies that allow them to collaborate where necessary, while respecting the need to protect their work from unauthorized use.

In this type of context, as you've seen in the security awareness and the recently launched research security policy writ large across the country, it's very important that our science personnel are able to collaborate, but that, at the same time, they are very aware of the need for review, approvals, permissions and appropriate boundaries on that collaboration.

• (1345)

Ms. Jean Yip: Does that supportive culture extend to Chinese Canadian scientists? Since the incident at the Winnipeg lab, the sensitive research guidelines, as you've mentioned, have been introduced, resulting in a list of research organizations that are believed to pose a high risk to national security. Most of the organizations named on the list are Chinese. This has hindered funding applications and career advancement for some Chinese Canadian scientists, based not necessarily on any association with organizations on the list but solely on their Chinese surnames. What assurances can you provide to these scientists?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: It's for exactly this reason that the investigation processes we conducted at the time were so thorough and relied on evidence rather than allegations. The processes that we have in place now to review research collaborations and affiliations are broad-based and not specific to particular individuals. All of our scientists must sign a code of conduct and are required to declare conflicts of interest and affiliations.

In this case, we had scientists who sought to hide undeclared affiliations, and that was the reason they were fired. Scientists who work in the full knowledge of their declared conflicts of interest and affiliations have nothing to fear from the processes that we have enhanced and put in place.

Ms. Jean Yip: Mr. Lucas, Mr. Poliquin, or Mr. Sheppard, do you have any further comments on this issue?

Dr. Stephen Lucas (Deputy Minister, Department of Health): I would just note that the approach that Ms. Jeffrey articulated in terms of the research security of our labs is also undertaken at Health Canada labs, albeit with different functions and different biosecurity levels. Indeed, the approach is undertaken across the government, consistent with the policies that Minister Champagne and, most recently, Minister Holland have articulated in terms of research security.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Yip.

Now it's Mr. Villemure's turn, for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much.

Ms. Jeffrey, since I only have two and a half minutes, I'm going to proceed fairly quickly.

After reading the report tabled in Parliament, it seems to me that everything we read stems from incompetence or naïveté. In my opinion, PHAC failed to protect the public in this case.

During your recent appearance, you said the following about lab security:

The security screening process begins with reliability status checks that are conducted by the security department of the agency. They are then referred to the RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service for security clearances.

Then you acknowledged that PHAC gives the final approval. We're talking in particular about the accreditation of scientists from the People's Liberation Army.

Did you base your reasoning on the advice of CSIS or the RCMP? Did you base it on something else, and if so, what? I'd ask you to avoid clichés and get straight to the point.

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In the process that we undertake to provide security clearances, the Public Health Agency and the security branch of the health portfolio undertake the initial reliability checks, etc. All security clearances go through a process of verification by the RCMP and then are referred for secret security clearances to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, which conducts reliability assessments. It sends its assessments back to PHAC security, and the final decisions are made.

In the case of these clearances, for example, when indices were raised by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the deputy head of the agency took the decision to revoke the clearance.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: You did say that these people had an undeclared affiliation with the People's Liberation Army. It's not the Knights of Columbus. You made your decision based on investigations. Were those investigations incomplete? Did you have all the information you needed? It was the People's Liberation Army, so it's no minor matter. We're not talking about a non-profit organization.

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would say security clearances are periodically reviewed.

At the time the security clearances were granted, these were scientists who had long-standing work at the agency. None of the indices or events that subsequently emerged were evident. Indeed, in these documents, there is no evidence prior to this time of covert activities.

• (1350)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay. My take-away is that policies don't work. Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

Ms. Idlout, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.*

My next couple of questions are regarding others' views on Canada and whether Canada's credibility has been impacted.

Do you believe that the Winnipeg lab incident has impacted Canada's credibility with the research institutions of our NATO and Five Eyes partners?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The national microbiology lab is a world-renowned research institution of high reputation. Our partners internationally also face similar threats of foreign interference and are adopting many similar measures.

The science of the lab remains well respected. The lab continues to be accredited, for example, by U.S. counterparts to the highest standards of biosafety and biosecurity.

No, I don't believe the lab's reputation has suffered, given the action that we took and the strengthening of the security protocols since that time.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Could you elaborate more on what you mean by the policies or the strategies that may have changed to make sure that we have greater resilience in the scientific institutions?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The measures that we took were in several different domains. There have been physical security measures and enhancements related to our protocols around shipping, physical security of the lab and access controls. We have more stringent policies in terms of the use of students at the lab. We have strengthened our intellectual property protocols. We have strengthened our cybersecurity measures.

We have a detailed program of co-operation with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and Public Safety to ensure that we're abreast of any changes in the security landscape. We have enhanced our training and protocols for our staff, so that they're aware and able to flag any incidents that might be of concern for further investigation.

The Chair: You're just about out of time. Thank you.

Dr. Ellis, you have five minutes now.

Mr. Stephen Ellis (Cumberland—Colchester, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair, and thanks to everyone for being here.

Ms. Jeffrey, you talked about security clearances being reviewed on a regular basis. Can you talk about what the current policy is?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The current security screening process for security clearances at the secret level requires review every 10 years unless incidents arise that require a "review for cause" of that clearance, as was the case in this situation.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

Before this incident, when was the security clearance for Dr. Qiu last reviewed?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm sorry. I don't have that information at hand.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Can you please provide that to the committee?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you for that.

Are there any health scientists of any nationality currently working for the Government of Canada who have participated in one of the over 200 PRC talent recruitment programs?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm not able to comment on that. I can comment on the processes at the Public Health Agency, where we require conflict of interest and affiliation declarations from all of our scientists and indeed from all of our personnel. I can say that participation in the talent programs of foreign countries, if declared, would be a significant conflict of interest and would not be accepted.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you for that.

Can you tell the committee, to the best of your knowledge, are there any employees working at labs in Canada now who are members of talent programs?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I'm unable to comment on labs across the country. I can comment only on the declared affiliations and conflicts of interest of the staff at the Public Health Agency, as I previously mentioned.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Yes, so how many scientists would fall into that—

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Villemure.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: As I said earlier, Ms. Jeffrey ends her sentences by whispering, and I can't hear her answers.

• (1355)

[English]

The Chair: Okay. I'll give some floor cues.

Do you need the preceding answer to be repeated, Mr. Villemure?

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Yes, please.

[English]

The Chair: Okay. I've stopped the clock.

Can you repeat that, please?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: What I can say is, first of all, I am the deputy head of the Public Health Agency of Canada. I'm not in a position to comment on the participation of scientists across the country. I can comment on the work of the personnel that belong to the Public Health Agency. I can say that they're required to submit declarations of affiliations for research and also conflict of interest. If employees were in them, those types of talent programs are required to be declared. If they were declared, they would constitute a conflict of interest and would not be allowed, given the nature of the work.

In the case that's at issue today, scientists hid and, in fact, lied about those affiliations, and when they were discovered, those scientists were terminated because of that.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Dr. Ellis.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

Dr. Lucas, what we heard from Ms. Jeffrey just now is that there are no scientists known to be participating in any talent programs that the Government of Canada would be aware of. Is that your indication as well, sir?

Dr. Stephen Lucas: Mr. Chair, similar to the response from Madam Jeffrey, I can speak to Health Canada. The regulatory scientists in Health Canada who perform product reviews in the context of the Food and Drugs Act and other statutes are subject to the same requirements in terms of declarations of conflicts of interest and affiliations. On the basis of those, to our knowledge, there are no affiliations or conflicts of concern, including with respect to talent programs.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you for that, Dr. Lucas.

Through you, Chair, I ask the same question to Ms. Huggins. Are you aware of any scientists with declared affiliations with talent programs who are currently working for the Government of Canada?

Ms. Nadine Huggins: The answer to that question is similar to those from Ms. Jeffrey and Dr. Lucas. I have no knowledge of that and am unable to make that blanket assertion.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you.

We now know that Dr. Qiu's computer was mirrored in about February 2019. In spite of all that, shipments of Ebola and hantavirus were allowed to continue on March 31, 2019.

Do you think that's appropriate?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As I mentioned, there was extensive international collaboration in responding to the Ebola outbreak that took place in west Africa from 2014 to 2016. The work of the national microbiology lab and indeed, Dr. Qiu's life's work, was in therapeutics to respond to Ebola.

The collaboration that was taking place was authorized and fully approved through the procedures that were in place. With a view—

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thanks, Ms. Jeffrey.

If I might interrupt you.... I apologize. I didn't ask you if they were approved. I asked you if you think it's appropriate, given what you now know.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I think that international collaboration on therapeutics for pathogens and toxins continues to be very important to the development of the science.

I would say that, obviously, in hindsight, given the activities of these scientists and evidence of those activities, which emerged much later in that timeline, we would obviously look at decisions that were taken around their work sooner.

However, the work of collaboration on Ebola continued to be an international priority. Indeed, many countries—Canada, the United States and China included—were active in western Africa, responding on the ground to the Ebola outbreak. It was in that vein that the collaboration was approved and the work authorized.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ellis.

We'll now go to Mr. Erskine-Smith for five minutes.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith (Beaches—East York, Lib.): Thanks, Chair.

On the one hand, we had the director of CSIS at this committee earlier, who said that in his view, PHAC acted expeditiously. That's a good thing.

I do want to pick up, though, on my colleague's questioning just now.

I understand the rationale for the shipment of Ebola to the Wuhan Institute of Virology at the end of March 2019.

It's my understanding, when I look through the email chains, that it was Dr. Qiu who instigated that transfer. Is that correct?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I will turn to my colleague, Dr. Poliquin, to talk about the rationale for that transfer. It was related to Dr. Qiu's work, but I'll turn it over to Dr. Poliquin.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, at that point, Dr. Qiu was a long-standing, internationally recognized scientist who had led the development of the Ebola monoclonal antibodies, which were—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I understand that.

Was she the instigator of the transfer, yes or no?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Dr. Qiu was the primary interlocutor with WIV.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Okay.

At the same time, Presidia didn't get nearly the facts that CSIS was able to uncover, but they were contracted a week earlier, in December 2018. There's a preliminary report. They have investigative findings.

In their investigative findings, they say in relation to the undisclosed patent by Dr. Qiu that it's "highly improbable that she did not know". They go on to note that there was a "collaboration" with a number of individuals, including at the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences, for which there may not be a "Letter of Support" and further investigation was required.

At that point, there is an investigation under way specifically related to Dr. Qiu. I've seen the email chains. There are other PHAC officials who are obviously doing the approvals here.

How is it that there are no red flags?

I'll stay with Mr. Poliquin. You seem to know more. Why were there no red flags? How could there possibly not be red flags?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: As Ms. Jeffrey highlighted, China had been very active in the 2014 to 2016 west Africa Ebola outbreak—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I don't mean about China. I mean Dr. Qiu.

Dr. Qiu is under investigation. There's a report related to Dr. Qiu on March 23. She is the instigating force behind this transfer.

How are there not red flags at that point?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, as has been previously highlighted, these were allegations. Further investigation was ongoing.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Except that the report says it's "highly improbable that she did not know" about the patent. Yes, further investigation is warranted, but they're already casting aspersions on the authenticity of her answers at that point.

I'll be honest, on the chain of events, there's major overblown commentary from Conservatives. We have the CSIS director coming here and saying no, there was expeditious action, but I look at the email chains here on approval....

Look, PHAC was aware of this too. I see an email from Allan Lau on April 3 saying, "We didn't do anything wrong...just that because of the nature of the pathogens and where it was going they (the higher-ups in PHAC) wanted to know if we did our due diligence."

It strikes me that, if full due diligence has been done, specifically in relation to Dr. Qiu, that transfer does not occur at the end of March. Is that fair to say?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The investigations were ongoing at that time, and the procedures were ongoing.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Lastly, Ms. Jeffrey, you said to my colleague, Mr. Fragiskatos—and I appreciate it—that there were "no unauthorized removals". At the same time, there were many documented instances in which restricted visitors had inappropriate access. You have shipments regularly mislabelled.

Given the evidence of lying from Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng, the evidence that they were completely untruthful on multiple occasions, matched with the evidence of mislabelling and inappropriate access for restricted visitors, what makes you so confident that there were no unauthorized removals? What do you base that on?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I base that statement on the very rigorous, multi-key approach that we have to safeguard pathogens and toxins.

I'll turn to Dr. Poliquin to talk about the audit process that ensures that we have an accurate accounting constantly of those materials.

• (1405)

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Under the HPT regulations, inventory control for these pathogens is very complex. It involves regular auditing of the materials. It's done independently of any other scientists and has been an ongoing process over the past 20 years. Following the regular audit procedures, but also in the wake of the incidents, audits were conducted, and we can confirm that all specimens that were expected to be there and logged are present and accounted for.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I appreciate that.

I know, Mr. Chair, I'm out of time.

I appreciate all the answers. I would just say that it would be even better if you said that you've done a lot of due diligence and you did the best you could—CSIS is coming to your defence in a very serious way—and acknowledged that that transfer at the end of March was a mistake. That would also be welcome.

Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Now, we're going a little into our second hour. Would the committee like to go to six minutes each and then go back to the five, five, two and a half, two and a half minutes? Or do you want to continue with five, five, two and a half, two and a half minutes?

I'm thinking in particular of the Bloc and the NDP having a bit of extra question time.

Hon. Michael Chong: Why?

The Chair: Why not?

Hon. Michael Chong: [*Inaudible—Editor*] of the committee, and we are four-elevenths of the committee. We should just continue with—

The Chair: I'm sorry, but the issue is that normally, after an hour, we flip panels and then we begin with the routine all over—six minutes each side, then five, five, two and a half and two and a half minutes.

I'm just asking the committee if they want to revert to that pattern for this second hour.

Hon. Michael Chong: I believe, Mr. Chair, since it is a single, two-hour panel, we should abide by the terms of the routine motion adopted at the beginning of this committee to continue as that motion specifies.

The Chair: Are there any other comments on this? I see none.

All right. We will live, then, according to the routine motions, and we will go to Mr. Chong for five minutes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Jeffrey, you mentioned several times that international collaboration in research among level 4 labs in the area of human pathogens and viruses is important. My question is asked in that context.

The named research organizations list that Public Safety has developed and put out does not include the Wuhan Institute of Virology. That list, though, does state that institutions that are not on the list may still pose a risk and that different entities within the Government of Canada are to take that risk and assess it, even though institutions like the Wuhan Institute of Virology may not be on the list.

The Minister of Health, I think, previously said that there was collaboration going on between entities in the PRC and the national microbiology laboratory, and then later said that there wasn't any collaboration going on. My simple question is this: Can you confirm that there is no ongoing collaboration, either in terms of transfers of information or materials, between the lab in Winnipeg and any entities in the People's Republic of China, including the Wuhan Institute of Virology?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I can confirm that, since this collaboration that we've been speaking of today ended, there is no collaboration with the government of China or institutes in China on issues related to that lab or any others. Minister Holland was referring to the fact that we continue to participate in the UN and other multilateral bodies where it's possible that there could be representatives of the government of China present, but there are no bilateral co-operation or collaboration agreements now.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Chong, I'm going to stop the clock.

Mr. Villemure has lost connection, and we're just getting him back on.

Hon. Michael Chong: Sure.

The Chair: We'll just suspend for a moment.

• (1405) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1410)

The Chair: We are back.

We are still trying to connect with Mr. Villemure. We'll do our best, but in the meantime, the business must proceed.

Mr. Chong, you have two minutes and 42 seconds remaining.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair. My question is for the deputy minister of health.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, we're trying to understand why it took 10 months for the lab to be secured. My question is this: When did the deputy minister of health first become aware of the issues in the Winnipeg lab? Was it in 2018 or 2019?

Dr. Stephen Lucas: Mr. Chair, I assumed my role at Health Canada at the beginning of September 2019. I don't have specific information pertaining to my predecessor's being informed, but I would assume that he would have been informed at key junctures by the president of the Public Health Agency at that time.

Hon. Michael Chong: Could you get back to the committee with that information? It's material.

Dr. Stephen Lucas: Yes.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

Madam Jeffrey, several times in your opening remarks and otherwise you have referred to processes that have been put in place that are broad-based, not related to any specific individuals. You have said that your security posture and policies have been strengthened and adapted and that specific personnel security measures have been updated.

Could you tell us a little about what exactly those processes, those policies, those postures and those measures are?

• (1415)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, I'm happy to speak specifically about some of the policies. For obvious reasons, we won't speak to the details of operational physical security measures.

I would point, for example, to the review of all collaboration agreements by a science security committee, in addition to the investigators and the lab management. I would point to enhanced compliance monitoring from our security branch. As well, we have partnerships with our security and law enforcement agencies. I would point to the mandatory requirement for not just conflict of interest but affiliation declarations, the access control systems and the new student policies that require appropriate clearances.

Hon. Michael Chong: Have any of these—

The Chair: Your time has expired, Mr. Chong. I'm sorry.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay.

The Chair: There will be further opportunities. I think we have a fair amount of time left.

Ms. Lalonde, you now have five minutes.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for joining us today.

[English]

There have been some concerns surrounding whether we have the appropriate security measures to set up a level 4 lab in Saskatchewan.

Would you say, based on our readiness, that we're ready to set up a level 4 lab in Canada? What processes would be in place prior to approving a level 4 lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The Human Pathogens and Toxins Act has very stringent requirements for work that happens with pathogens of different risk groups. There is a list of pathogens according to their safeguards, and the requirements for them.

The recently announced budget also includes indications of new legislation being brought forward to enhance the regulations further, given the postpandemic requirements for Canada to have domestic laboratory capabilities, health and life sciences capabilities and biomanufacturing capabilities to provide health security for us against future health threats and future potential pandemics.

The processes under the HPTA require licensing. They require clearances for all personnel. They require a graduated approach to be put in place that limits how and with what those new facilities would be able to work. There is inspection and on-site monitoring that is required. The clearance processes have also been enhanced.

Any application for a potential new laboratory requiring that it would be subject to the HPTA, including level 3 and level 4 labs, would require stringent regulation. Licenses and approvals would not be granted for their operation without having detailed planning in place.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you, Ms. Jeffrey.

What are the processes in place to protect national security when working with international collaborations in laboratory research? Can you also give some examples of why Canada's collaboration with other countries on scientific research is so crucial?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The work we undertook at the Public Health Agency and through the national microbiology lab in response to COVID-19 is an excellent example of the linkages that are required to combat a novel pathogen.

I would like to turn to Dr. Poliquin to give some of the concrete examples of how the work with our colleagues advanced those efforts.

• (1420)

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Indeed, international collaboration in this space is essential for the advancement of the work. A concrete example that is pertinent here would be the development of the Ebola monoclonal antibody cocktail involved in the development of multiple components of that treatment, some of which came from American innovation and advancement. It is by putting together those advances that the ultimate product was realized.

By extension, our ability to collaborate internationally and to bring together the best minds to tackle the problems at hand are an essential feature of that work. However, we are very cognizant, and have become even more so, of the shifting threat environment that we operate in. Hence, any new collaborations that are borne out at the NML involve a security dimension and security review prior to our commencing the work.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much. If I have time, I would like to ask one more question.

What is the purpose of the national microbiology laboratory sharing samples with other public health laboratories?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: It is essential to share samples between the level 4 labs, as these are what enable the science to be done. By having the specimens on hand, we are able to do diagnostic development, applied research and medical countermeasure development, but a lot of that work is essentially rooted in having access to the samples to do the work.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lalonde.

Mr. Villemure has rejoined us.

We're sorry to have lost you there for a few moments. I just want to bring you up to speed on where we are. You will have the next two and a half minutes, followed by Ms. Idlout for two and a half minutes. We then have Mr. Cooper for five minutes and Mr. Erskine-Smith for five minutes.

My calculation gives us time for another round of five, five, two and a half and two and a half, so think about who you would like from your team. It's pretty obvious for the Bloc and the NDP, but for the Liberals and the Conservatives, get your lineup ready for that last go-around, okay?

Mr. Villemure, you have two and a half minutes, sir.

You may be on mute, Mr. Villemure. If you can hear us, unplug your headset and then plug it in again.

Perhaps we'll flip the order.

Ms. Idlout, are you ready for your two and a half minutes?

Ms. Lori Idlout: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. We'll go to Ms. Idlout first and then back to you, Mr. Villemure, in two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.*

What other countries should the committee be aware of, in terms of foreign interference, in our research institutions?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I think that's a question that is probably best posed to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and to our national security colleagues.

At the Public Health Agency, we are alert to ensuring that all our international collaborations are approved and vetted, and we have fully implemented the research policy on sensitive technology research, including the national security guidelines for research partnerships with named research organizations. We are fully compliant with all those procedures, but the realm of foreign interference is in the national security domain, not in public health.

Ms. Lori Idlout: Okay. Thank you.

In terms of your work on future preparedness and potential future threats that are most concerning to PHAC, what should we, as parliamentarians, be aware of?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: As we saw during the COVID pandemic, there remain significant public health threats in a globalized world. We are currently undertaking work and research looking at H5N1, or avian influenza, measles outbreaks and mpox. We have daily threat assessment and response meetings, assessing all these threats. Our lab and the level 3 and level 4 facilities we have are essential in enabling us to look at some of the high-consequence pathogens.

I'll turn to Dr. Poliquin to outline some additional areas of his work.

• (1425)

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Indeed, at this time, we are living in a period in which we are seeing increasing activity of diseases. Part of the role of the national microbiology lab is to remain abreast of these.

Mpox is a good example, with a recent outbreak domestically and ongoing activity in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example.

It is through connections globally and with our international partners that we are able to keep abreast of what is happening in other countries. That helps to inform our work and our preparedness, both with diagnostics to be ready to detect new threats and with medical countermeasures to help combat them.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Idlout.

We've lost Mr. Villemure again. If we manage to get him back and fully functioning, I'd like to give him five minutes, if that's okay, because he's missed two rounds.

Mr. Cooper, you have five minutes now.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Madam Jeffrey, have any of the processes, posture, policies or measures recently implemented triggered any review of security clearances in PHAC other than the standard review every 10 years?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I think the committee is aware that there is an ongoing RCMP investigation, and I would have to refer the committee to my colleagues at Public Safety Canada and the RCMP in terms of their investigations and any work that's under way there.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's Dr. Qiu and Dr. Cheng.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm not aware of the details of their investigations, so I will have to refer you to Public Safety Canada.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you.

Are PRC citizens who are not Canadian citizens or citizens of formally allied countries allowed to be granted secret security clearances?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The policy on security clearance is set by the Treasury Board Secretariat. It is irrespective of nationality.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: I can see you, and I can hear you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Villemure, you're back with us, are you?

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Yes, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: We're going to give you five minutes because you've missed two of your two-and-a-half-minute segments. We have Mr. Cooper now. We have Mr. Erskine-Smith, and then we'll go to you for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you very much for that.

[*English*]

The Chair: I stopped the clock, Michael. You have three and a half minutes.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Thank you for that.

Paragraph 31 of the June 30, 2020, CSIS assessment on Dr. Qiu states that an individual identified as "Restricted Visitor #1" had access to the Winnipeg lab. This individual was an employee of the People's Liberation Army-controlled Beijing Institute of Biotechnology, whose mentor was a major general identified as Beijing's "chief biological weapons defense expert engaged in research related to...bio-defence and bio-terrorism."

Did this individual have a secret security clearance?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'm going to defer to Dr. Poliquin about the processes for restricted visitors at the lab.

Mr. Michael Cooper: It's yes or no.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: In terms of access to the laboratory, restricted visitors were a special category of individuals who would be under escort at all times but who would not have had access to high-containment laboratories.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Who granted, who authorized, this Beijing military scientist's access to the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would say that the policy on visitors restricted their access to areas in line with the clearances they had, so there would have been no access of visitors to restricted level 3 and level 4 labs.

Mr. Michael Cooper: That's not my question. They had access to the lab. They were in the lab. They might not have been in the level 4 part of the lab. I'm asking you, Ms. Jeffrey—or whoever may answer—this: Who authorized that access by a Beijing military scientist whose mentor was Beijing's foremost expert in bioterrorism?

• (1430)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: When we use the term “national microbiology lab”, we're referring to a complex of buildings that has both secure and public facilities. I'll turn to our two security officers to talk about the policy.

Mr. Michael Cooper: I want to know who authorized that individual.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: We will return to the committee with that information. I don't have it at hand.

Mr. Michael Cooper: Paragraph 54 of the same CSIS assessment states that Dr. Qiu gave access to the lab to at least two individuals who are “employees of a PRC institution whose work is not aligned with Canadian interests”.

Did Dr. Qiu, on her own, have the authority to grant access to those individuals? If not, who did?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll defer to Dr. Poliquin with regard to the procedures at the lab.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Prior to access to the laboratory at the time, an individual would have had to fill out a facility access request form for a particular individual, and those are submitted to the security division for review to provide access. Also, as previously stated, access to the laboratory does not give full access to all parts of the laboratory. There are strict procedures—

Mr. Michael Cooper: I understand that. I thank you for that clarification. I presume that would also apply to the Beijing military scientist who was a restricted visitor.

Would CSIS intelligence assessments or reviews have been undertaken before those individuals were granted access to the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll turn to our chief security officer to talk about the procedures.

Ms. Nadine Huggins: The individuals attending the lab would have attended as temporary visitors under the policy at the time, which required them to be escorted if they were in the lab. They were granted access because they were not going to be in any part of the lab that was secure or required a clearance.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cooper.

Mr. Erskine-Smith, you have five minutes.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I don't want to dwell on this, but I do want to ask one follow-up question in relation to that transfer at the end of March 2019.

There's a big difference between the RCMP escorting someone out and curtailing their authority while an investigation is ongoing. When someone is under investigation for serious allegations that have potential national security consequences, due process is justified, of course, but in the interest of our national security, surely we should be looking at curtailing individual authority.

When we look at lessons learned here to ensure this does not happen again, are you looking at the processes by which one might curtail someone's authority while an investigation is ongoing?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Our security processes and procedures have been enhanced across the board. We have in place additional policies around security clearances, around access controls and around the types of visitors and students who are able to access the lab, and those policies are much more stringent than they were at the time, which would provide—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: I apologize for cutting you off.

Knowing that, if the policies that you have now had been in place and these allegations had been made—an investigation is ongoing, you have the preliminary report from Presidia and the transfer happens at the end of March—would the transfer have happened, knowing what we knew as of the end of March?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: All I can say is that it's a hypothetical question, Mr. Chair, because the collaboration—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: It's not, because we have the evidence as of that date in March, and we have new policies. We apply current policies to a fact pattern that is existing. It's not hypothetical; it's an existing fact pattern.

Would that transfer have occurred at the end of March 2019 if the current policies had been in place?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Under the current policies, there would have been two additional layers of review for that collaboration, which was in fact approved in November 2018, although the shipment took place later.

The collaboration was approved much earlier, in line with the policies at the time. The difference now is that it would be approved by two additional layers of review.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: If the answer isn't, “No, it wouldn't necessarily have stopped the transfer,” you might still want to revisit those policies, because the answer should be, “Of course it should have stopped that transfer.”

There is a second avenue of questions I want to get to.

Presidia was contracted in December 2018. It made its first report in March 2019 and made a second report in February 2020. It effectively found nothing of value in comparison with what CSIS found out.

CSIS made a preliminary assessment in April 2020; mere months later, in June 2020, it blew the whole thing open, and that's why Dr. Qiu was ultimately marched out of the lab.

Why did CSIS not get involved earlier?

• (1435)

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: CSIS was involved from the outset. Indeed, it was an awareness session with CSIS that led the security branch to begin its investigation, working with the lab to see if we had vulnerabilities of the nature CSIS described.

Obviously, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service has tools and methods available to it under its act that afford it greater insight into covert and clandestine activities. CSIS has appeared before this committee previously.

The Public Health Agency could act only on the information provided to us. The investigation the service conducted was disclosed to us on June 30, 2020, and we took action at that time.

What I would say is that individuals—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Given the different outcomes of the Presidia analysis and investigation and the CSIS analysis and investigation, and knowing what we know today, do you think PHAC ought to have had CSIS undertake more detailed assessments earlier in the process?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The Canadian Security Intelligence Service was involved and informed of the activities that were under way from the outset of the cases that are under way. As disclosed in the documents, they were engaged and aware, and we were working together as of August and September 2018, so—

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Give a simple yes or no. Do you see a material difference in the quality of the investigations between Presidia and CSIS?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Yes, of course. Canadian Security Intelligence Service members have tools available to them under the act that only they have. They were involved in the fact-finding and the investigation all the way along. It wasn't until the later stages of that investigation that they were able to obtain the information that informed that June 30 letter.

For example, under a letter of April 9, they had not yet found the information that was available to them later. That letter suggested that there still was no reason to suggest that the scientists had willingly co-operated or that they were vulnerable. Clearly, in the intervening time between April 9 and June 30, their investigations and their tools uncovered information that radically changed that assessment, and we acted immediately upon receiving that information.

This was a case in which people took steps to hide their activities, and the national security and law enforcement investigations were deploying all their tools throughout to try to uncover additional evidence. They eventually did so on June 30.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Erskine-Smith.

Mr. Nathaniel Erskine-Smith: Thank you.

The Chair: Just to recap where we are, because you missed a couple of rounds, Mr. Villemure, you're getting the next five minutes. We'll then go to Dr. Ellis and Mr. Fragiskatos, and then there will be two and a half minutes for Mr. Villemure and two and a half minutes for Ms. Ildout. I think that will just about wrap up the session.

Mr. Villemure, it's good to have you back with us. Five minutes go to you, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank my colleagues for their understanding.

Ms. Jeffrey, in listening to your answers, we get the impression that everything is going well. You say that policies were put in place, and that it was not a problem.

Policies protect people of good faith. So we have to know what to do with other people.

Were any individuals held accountable? I'm asking you to be specific. Were there any consequences for certain people who were directly responsible for all the mistakes or incompetence identified?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The individuals who hid their activities and undertook clandestine collaborations have been terminated, fired from the public service and the like. The—

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: I'm sorry to interrupt, but that's not who I'm talking about. I'm talking about people at the agency who didn't see anything when they should have seen something.

Were any individuals, other than the two scientists, held accountable for this whole mess?

• (1440)

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I can say that it was the Public Health Agency that first raised issues about potential activity that was under way that launched the investigation.

The Canadian Security Intelligence Service has already stated that we acted as expeditiously as we could, given the information that was available. We found allegations. We followed them up with an administrative investigation. We sought the evidence, working with our security intelligence partners, and we fired the scientists involved.

The processes and policies that we put in place are designed to have further layers of security and process that will allow us to detect efforts to disguise collaborations, affiliations and other motivations as quickly as possible in the future.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Ms. Jeffrey, was there incompetence in the management of the agency?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In this case, the leadership of the agency and the lab took steps as quickly as they could to respond to the information. They detected and raised the allegations, and measures were put in place accordingly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. René Villemure: Was there incompetence at the agency?

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In this case, we are talking about scientists who, despite clearances and work that was widely recognized as leading science globally, hid their activities—

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Okay.

If I understand correctly, senior scientists concealed their activities. You've put policies in place to protect you and the Canadian public. When you noticed something, you took action.

It seems to me that it was quite a while before you noticed anything, and people were able to do things that weren't appropriate.

I understand that you took action when you finally noticed the red light, but before that, were there people who were incompetent in the face of this situation? Did you take it too much for granted that everyone was good, that everyone was nice? I understand that the science culture is collaborative. That's good, but in this case, it's as if we were entering an armoury: There were Chinese students and there were a lot of people. That seems to have been negligence or incompetence.

Take your pick: Was it negligence or incompetence?

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Mr. Chair, I would say that in retrospect, the policies that were put in place on students, for example, afforded too much latitude to scientists who obviously had a clandestine agenda of which we were not aware. As a result, those policies have been changed. However, the policies were respected in those cases. The policies that we have put in place now are far more stringent, and our compliance mechanisms are strengthened and regularly revisited.

We have learned lessons from this and strengthened our policies accordingly.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: So you've strengthened your policies as a result of the negligence you observed.

In early April, the Minister of Health confirmed that there was a list of people with whom we shouldn't do business. Several entities were on that list, but there was no mention of the Wuhan Institute of Virology or the Thousand Talents Program.

Why is that?

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: The composition of the list is done by the public safety and security services under the auspices of ISED. The Public Health Agency isn't privy to the details of why certain institutions have been placed on that list, but we are in full compliance.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: If I understand correctly, the agency didn't make any mistakes.

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

Now we'll go to Dr. Ellis for the next five minutes.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much, Chair.

Dr. Poliquin, on the transfer of the Ebola and Nipah viruses, would you say that national security was lax and that science took precedence over national security?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would say that at the time, there was a long-standing effort by China—as demonstrated in west Africa by deploying over 100 health personnel, as an example—to help combat—

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Dr. Poliquin, I'm sorry to interrupt you. I didn't ask for a lecture on Ebola. I've had those before.

My question today is whether national security was lax and science was chosen over national security. Is that not true, sir?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Mr. Chair, in this context, the aim was to reinforce public health security through the development of medical countermeasures. That was the stated purpose of the collaboration, and as such, the transfer was authorized.

• (1445)

Mr. Stephen Ellis: That being said, we know these scientists were under investigation for perhaps nine months before the transfer occurred. If the transfer had not occurred, what would the harm have been?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: The efforts under way were for the development of medical countermeasures, and several potential candidates for the treatment of Ebola and Henipah have been published since then.

It is difficult to ascertain what could have happened but, certainly, innovations that have been published in the public domain would likely not have occurred.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

Before Dr. Qiu's collaboration with the PRC and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, was the Wuhan Institute of Virology a level 4 lab? Answer simply yes or no.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'll turn to Dr. Poliquin on that.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Are you asking whether the...?

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Was the Wuhan Institute a level 4 lab before Dr. Qiu's collaboration?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: As far as I understand, the WIV was developed as a level 4 facility.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: That was not my question, sir.

Did Dr. Qiu's involvement help the lab, which is now a long-standing level 4 lab, get developed?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: I cannot speak to whether Dr. Qiu was involved and essential to that process.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you for that.

Do you know if the Government of Canada had an MOU with the PRC or the WIV, the Wuhan Institute, to help with its development into a level 4 lab?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: I'm not aware of such an MOU, should it exist.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Dr. Lucas, do you know of any MOU that may or may not exist?

Dr. Stephen Lucas: I'm not aware of any.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: I'll ask Ms. Jeffrey the same question.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: There was no MOU to establish a level 4 lab. In 2007, there was a science and technical co-operation agreement with China to boost collaborative research and development in the life sciences, including for vaccines. That's the only co-operation agreement of which I'm aware.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

We talked a little about the talent programs and scientists having affiliation with them, Ms. Jeffrey.

Would you have Canadians believe that these are the only two scientists with undeclared affiliation to talent programs with foreign governments?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I can't comment on what undeclared collaborations might be there. I can say that at the agency we have a policy requiring affiliations and conflict of interest to be declared. No such affiliations have been declared, and if they were declared, they would not be accepted.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

We've heard previously of course that Ebola and Nipah were shipped on a flight. I believe it was Air Canada, but I might have the exact commercial carrier incorrect.

Is that a normal procedure? Unlike our friend from the NDP, of course we realize that it was not carried on board, but is that a usual procedure?

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Yes, the transfer of level 4 pathogens falls under the transportation of dangerous goods regulations, which involves the development of an emergency research response action plan as well as a number of additional checks.

However, the ultimate carrier for these types of samples is often commercial.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Ellis.

Mr. Stephen Ellis: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, you have five minutes.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Jeffrey, can you talk a little more about the screening processes in place with respect to researchers? How is that particularly different now, as a result of this experience?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I'd say that there are two levels of screening for all personnel who require clearances.

There is, of course, the security screening process, which we've already discussed here, including reliability status, including criminal and Canadian Security Intelligence Service checks.

There is also a separate Human Pathogens and Toxins Act clearance that's required to work with any sensitive listed materials. It also requires additional training in the use of those pathogens, as well as a separate security clearance that must be granted by the regulator.

• (1450)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Can we go back to the point on security screening? I understand that you've already shared with us information on that, but I am thinking about it especially in terms of the wider international context, which to me is fundamental in terms of learning from this experience.

Does the security screening process have some kind of harmonization, for lack of a better word, with what other countries are doing from a security screening perspective in their labs, or is it something that's quite unique to Canada? Is there some overlap, but not an entire overlap? Do you have any comments on that?

As we've heard at this committee before, this is not an issue that Canada is dealing with on its own. There are other countries, other allies, that have, if not the same experience, very similar experiences or challenges that they're preparing for, if they haven't already taken place. I just wonder about this from a wider international context.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I think obviously there are different legislative frameworks in different countries, but I think all countries would have in common a security screening and clearance process similar to the one that we have, writ large.

Countries also have specific legislation, but it differs for each country, similar to our Human Pathogens and Toxins Act. I'll turn to Dr. Poliquin, who has been dealing with labs in other countries, to speak to their different processes.

Dr. Guillaume Poliquin: Indeed, President Jeffrey is correct that, conceptually, other laboratories in the level 4 space operate in the same way with respect to the need for additional security screening prior to having access to level 3 and level 4 pathogens, particularly security-sensitive ones.

However, the specific mechanics of how that is ascertained is done at the country level.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I have only about two minutes left.

To both of you, what are the fundamental lessons learned here from an agency perspective? What has been learned, and what will you continue to be focused on to ensure the absolute security of the lab?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We've implemented a whole series of security enhancements based on the lessons learned from this process. The different areas of security policy and procedure that I outlined earlier range from cybersecurity to physical security to security clearances and above all to employee awareness, education and compliance. These are all reflections of the lessons we've learned from these issues.

In addition, I would say that the much stronger collaboration with our Public Safety and Canadian Security Intelligence Service colleagues that began during and immediately before these incidents, and the awareness and outreach of the research community that triggered the agency to look into these cases and ultimately led to the termination of these scientists, were the initial program of that work. Our global environment and evolving threat picture is such that we have to be closely joined up throughout the research process and throughout our work.

The additional work we have undertaken with Public Safety and CSIS through the pandemic context and our emergency response protocols are much tighter and closer than before.

The policies and procedures we put in place from an employee and research perspective are designed to provide flags much earlier than would have been the case before these incidents occurred.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

It's back to you, Mr. Villemure, for two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

You told me a little earlier, Ms. Jeffrey, that no one had been held responsible for this situation. There was no internal discipline, blame, or anything like that.

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would say that the two employees who actually were in violation of the policies have been terminated. Those were the disciplinary actions that were taken.

Those were the only violations of policies and protocols that were at play in these administrative investigations. They have been accordingly fired.

• (1455)

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you, but those are obviously not the people I'm talking about.

I've been listening to your answers for almost two hours. You say that there were incidents, that it was no one's fault, that you put policies in place, that everything will be fine and that it wasn't that serious.

However, this whole affair turned the House of Commons upside down, led the government to sue the former Speaker of the House for certain things not to be revealed, and led to the creation of an ad hoc committee made up of umpires. However, when we listen to your answers, we would think that nothing serious had happened.

I'm surprised that these incidents are trivialized in this way, and I'm not reassured as to what measures are being taken or could be taken. If there was a consequence, meaning the firing of two scientists, it was because there was a reason. But you don't seem to be able to tell us what the reason is.

[English]

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In my opening statement, I made it very clear that these were very serious security incidents. They were a violation of the duty of loyalty that all of our scientists strive to uphold every day. We take them very seriously indeed.

The protections that are in place to protect national security information and privacy information meant that they could not be fully disclosed in the public domain without appropriate protections, which have been provided by the ad hoc committee and the panel of arbiters. We're very pleased to be here today to discuss them.

I would say that foreign interference, as my Canadian security intelligence colleagues have said at this committee, is a very serious threat. It's a threat to our scientific research, public health capabilities and ability to respond to future threats. That's the reason we have put in place so many different measures across the different domains of security: personnel security, cybersecurity and physical security.

We take this very seriously. This duty of care is one that we are now maintaining and enhancing on an ongoing basis. This is not a static, one-time response. We have processes in place to periodically review all of our policies and procedures, to report incidents and to take actions to address them. I can assure you that we take these duties very seriously indeed.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Villemure.

[Translation]

Mr. René Villemure: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Ms. Idlout, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: *Qujannamiik, Iksivautaq.*

I'll be asking my final questions of the deputy minister of health, Mr. Stephen Lucas.

I'll be asking questions similar to those I asked of the Public Health Agency.

How often does your department meet with CSIS or other relevant security agencies to improve the operational security of Canada's research facilities?

Dr. Stephen Lucas: In the first instance, the chief security officer who's with us, Nadine Huggins, supports both Health Canada and the Public Health Agency of Canada through the work of her team. In that regard, as Madam Jeffrey has noted, there is increased engagement as we have reviewed and strengthened a range of policies pertaining to security in our laboratories and increased engagement with CSIS, Public Safety and other relevant organizations, including the Communications Security Establishment in regard to cybersecurity.

Ms. Lori Idlout: My last question would be this: What policies have changed over the last five years to improve the resilience of departmental activities from foreign interference?

Dr. Stephen Lucas: What I would note is twofold. In the first instance, as I indicated previously, the laboratories at Health Canada have as a fundamental objective supporting our regulatory system, so the focus is not on research per se but on laboratory methods for testing products such as pharmaceuticals and developing methodologies for our quality monitoring or testing of contaminants in water.

The policies and systems put in place to strengthen research security over the past number of years include strengthening physical security in terms of access and monitoring of research facilities; strengthening oversight and systems to protect against cybersecurity threats, which are indeed active; and focus on employee security clearance review, conflict of interest and affiliation declaration, training and oversight, including policies for laboratory visitors and students, as Madam Jeffrey spoke to previously.

These have been strengthened further to align with work undertaken in regard to all research institutions in Canada, as expressed by Minister Champagne, Ministers Hajdu and Duclos and, most recently, Minister Holland, including the policies on research in sensitive areas and named research organizations. Our work in policies is aligned to support the objectives and substance of those guidelines and policies to protect the research security laboratories at Health Canada.

• (1500)

The Chair: We're just about at the end. I have one quick question, and this is a very broad-based question, if you don't mind.

Any human-to-human transaction or relationship is usually based on the presumption of honesty, that the person you're dealing with is honest. With this experience that you've had and the necessity to protect such sensitive materials and knowledge, has that turned around, and do we now have a presumption that perhaps somebody is not going to be honest and they have to prove their honesty to us? It's a very broad question, but give a brief reflection, if you don't mind, Ms. Jeffrey.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Indeed, the clearance process itself requires individuals to declare many details of their past affiliations, lives and work. We do verify, through our security office and our chief security officer, those declarations. For all public servants who have clearances, there are checks done through the RCMP—criminal—and also through the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to verify, as well as through open and other sources of public information.

Where individuals seek to hide clandestinely other aspects of their intentions, it's very important that we have policies and procedures that are designed to provide tripwires, if you will. This enables us to flag areas for further investigation and research. It will also ensure that there is oversight and there are additional layers of approval for events if, indeed, the previous checks and clearances don't reveal some of those covert intentions.

What we have done is put additional layers that allow us to do additional steps and to have additional sets of eyes looking at approvals to make sure that there are multiple keys, if you will, to unlock different processes, approvals, collaborations and affiliations. For us, it is about trusting, but it's also about verifying. Our security services help us to do that, and our policies and procedures in the area of security help us to be continually vigilant.

That's what is really required here. It requires continual vigilance and awareness, and it requires individuals to act and flag things they see that might not be quite in line with policies. That's a culture, and that is the culture that we're building at the Public Health Agency through the processes that we've put in place since these incidents, now over four or five years ago.

The Chair: Mr. Chong has asked to make a quick comment.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have a question, Mr. Chair.

Could you instruct the analysts to prepare a briefing note for us, describing how security clearances are granted, particularly how Treasury Board guidelines work with respect to security clearances for PRC nationals who are not Canadian citizens?

The Chair: Your request has been made.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

The Chair: To be honest with you, I would not just limit that to the PRC, given what we've heard about foreign interference.

• (1505)

Hon. Michael Chong: Sure.

The Chair: Certainly, the nature of interference as alleged with regard to China and the PRC is one thing, but there are other actors. Who knows?

I want to thank everybody.

Ms. Jeffrey and colleagues, you've been generous with your time. I know that this is not exactly the most comfortable way to spend a Friday afternoon, but we do appreciate your time with us and your answers.

As for my colleagues, well done today.

Thank you very much to all of the support staff.

The meeting is adjourned.

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