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SARS escaped Beijing lab twice

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The [latest outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome \(SARS\) in China](#), with eight confirmed or suspected cases so far and hundreds quarantined, involves two researchers who were working with the virus in a Beijing research lab, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday (April 26).

"We suspect two people, a 26-year-old female postgraduate student and a 31-year-old male postdoc, were both infected, apparently in two separate incidents," Bob Dietz, WHO spokesman in Beijing, told us.

The woman was admitted to hospital on April 4, but the man apparently became infected independently 2 weeks later, being hospitalized on April 17. Both worked at the Chinese Institute of Virology in Beijing, part of China's Center for Disease Control.

At a news conference in Manila this morning, Associated Press [reported](#), WHO Western Pacific Regional Director Shigeru Omi criticized the laboratory's safeguards and said the authorities did not know yet whether any foreigners had been carrying out medical research in the facility and had since left the country. Laboratory safety "is a serious issue that has to be addressed," he said. "We have to remain very vigilant."

China has level three research guidelines and rules in place for handling the SARS virus, which are "of acceptable quality" to WHO, Dietz told us. But "it's a question of procedures and equipment. Frankly we are going to go in now and take a very close look," he said.

"We have a team of two or three international experts that's arriving in a day or two. They are going to go into the labs with Ministry of Health people and find out what happened here," Dietz said.

"We've been told we'll have full access, be able to test all the surfaces, interview people who worked there, and look at documentation to find out what was being done," Dietz said. "We're not releasing the names of the experts yet, but once you see the names you'll recognize them. They will be international experts from the relevant disciplines."

In the meantime, the lab has been closed, and the 200 staff have been put in isolation in a hotel near another lab in Cham Ping, about 20 kilometers North of Beijing. China is rushing [its own investigative teams](#) to check lab security, according to state media.

Antoine Danchin, an epidemiologist with the [Hong Kong University-Pasteur Research Center](#), who studied the SARS epidemic in Hong Kong, told us the latest incidents were probably the result of lab accidents.

"Normally, it's not possible to contaminate people even under level two confinement, if the security rules are obeyed, with the appropriate hoods, and so on," Danchin said. SARS work requires level three. "So it suggests there has been some mishandling of something."

"The lab might have all the right rules, but the people may not comply! For example, notebooks are not supposed to be taken out, a lot of things like that. A virus doesn't jump on people!" Danchin

said. However WHO Beijing is relatively sanguine about the current threat, despite the fact that the 26-year-old infected had taken a long journey on the country's rail network. The index cases are known, and contacts had been traced, Dietz said. "We see no significant public health threat at this point."

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