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Patently False: The Disinformation Over Coronavirus Patents

It's easy for the conspiracy-minded to show patents claiming the new coronavirus was an "inside job", but it is apparently much harder for them to even glance at the first page of these patent applications



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Since the pandemic started, some public figures with a pronounced distrust of authority have gone on a patent hunt.

We have seen Mike Adams, the *Plandemic* conspiracy film, and a recent French video viewed by nearly 1.5 million people claim that a trail of patent applications prove that scientists created the COVID-19 coronavirus in a laboratory. They also apparently decided to protect their intellectual property along the way.

There are two lessons I want to draw from this on-going patent fear-mongering. The first is that "coronavirus" is not a word that only applies to the agent behind COVID-19. Coronaviruses are a subfamily in the grand classification of viruses. They include our current enemy, SARS-CoV-2, but also a different coronavirus that caused SARS nearly twenty years ago, and the coronavirus that produces the Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). This subfamily also contains the coronaviruses that are responsible for 15 to 30% of cases of the common cold in humans. And, importantly, there are many coronaviruses that do not infect us but that cause respiratory and gastrointestinal infections in animals, like birds and pigs. So when we hear of a patent on "the coronavirus," our first question should be, "which one?" The second lesson is that fact-checking certain bold claims can be remarkably simple, even without a science degree!

I tracked down the patents that have been scaring people into believing in a coronavirus conspiracy. They are easily findable on the website patents.google.com (http://patents.google.com). Is any of them a smoking gun for the conspiracy-minded? Not at all.

The Pirbright Institute, a research centre in England, filed for a patent on "the coronavirus" in 2015, but it is for a coronavirus that causes avian bronchitis. The word "avian" means "relating to birds." This is not SARS-CoV-2; it's a virus called IBV. (Multiple instances of this application can be found as [US10130701B2](https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/31/23/d0/e63e0adde2fbad/US10130701.pdf) (https://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/31/23/d0/e63e0adde2fbad/US10130701.pdf), [EP3172319A1](http://patents.google.com/patent/EP3172319A1) (http://patents.google.com/patent/EP3172319A1/en) and [EP3172319B1](https://patents.google.com/patent/EP3172319B1) (https://patents.google.com/patent/EP3172319B1/en).) The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was flagged in the conspiracy video *Plandemic* as being the start of the coronavirus patent "rabbit trail," but the patent we are shown is for a coronavirus that causes gastroenteritis in pigs and that typically kills newborn piglets that catch it ([US7279327B2](http://patents.google.com/patent/US7279327B2) (http://patents.google.com/patent/US7279327B2/en) and [WO02086068A2](http://patents.google.com/patent/WO02086068A2) (http://patents.google.com/patent/WO02086068A2/ru)).

A French conspiracy video making the rounds points to a coronavirus patent held by the Institut Pasteur, the CNRS, and the Université Paris VII ([EP1694829B1](http://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/e0/4e/2e/09e238c87e2d20/EP1694829B1.pdf) (http://patentimages.storage.googleapis.com/e0/4e/2e/09e238c87e2d20/EP1694829B1.pdf)). The video even goes so far as to accuse France of creating the COVID-19 coronavirus and releasing it in Wuhan. The French patent, as it turns out, is for a human coronavirus: SARS-CoV. Before COVID-19, the virus responsible for SARS in 2003 was called "SARS-CoV." Some

researchers have now begun to refer to it as “SARS-CoV-1” to more clearly distinguish it from SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19. When a patent application from the early 2000s refers to “SARS-CoV”, it is a different virus than the one we are dealing with now, which did not exist at the time (a precursor of it was most likely being passed around in animals like bats but it had not been transmitted to humans yet). Another patent application, this one filed by Chiron Corp in 2004, is also tied to SARS-CoV-1 ([US2006257852A1](https://patents.google.com/patent/US2006257852A1) ([https://patents.google.com/patent/US2006257852A1](https://patents.google.com/patent/US2006257852A1/en?q=US2006257852) (<https://patents.google.com/patent/US2006257852A1/en?q=US2006257852>)).

But scientists cannot patent life, you may think to yourself. It is true that no one can patent an entire living thing as it naturally exists in the world. It also bears mentioning that viruses are not technically alive though they share some characteristics with living things. However, part of a living thing that has real-world utility and that has been transformed in some way by humans can be patented. In the case of these SARS coronavirus patents, companies wanted to protect the isolation of the genetic material of specific strains of this virus in order to exclude others from commercializing a testing kit or even a potential vaccine based on that virus.

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States stepped in at the time and filed their own patent on the isolated SARS virus, its genes, its proteins, and the methods to detect it and the infection it was causing ([US7220852B1](https://patents.google.com/patent/US7220852B1) (<https://patents.google.com/patent/US7220852B1/en>) and [US776521B1](https://patents.google.com/patent/US776521B1) (<https://patents.google.com/patent/US776521B1/en>)). The reason? They wanted to prevent others from “monopolizing the field” (https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Ka4TsSWbE18J:www.nbcnews.com/id/3076748/ns/health-infectious_diseases/t/scientists-race-patent-sars-virus/-&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=ca) and to allow researchers to develop diagnostics and therapeutics to help deal with the SARS outbreak.

Whether or not using technology to isolate genetic material that exists in the wild should even be patentable is a valid discussion to have. In fact, an American company that held the patent on the *BRCA1/2* genes for breast cancer and ovarian cancer testing was sued over the validity of this patent. The case made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in 2013 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/us/supreme-court-rules-human-genes-may-not-be-patented.html>) that simply isolating a natural product is not enough to warrant a patent. But just because some research centres and companies filed to patent animal coronaviruses and the human SARS virus means absolutely nothing with regards to the COVID-19 coronavirus. There is still zero evidence that this new coronavirus was created by humans and every indication that it mutated spontaneously (<https://theconversation.com/heres-how-scientists-know-the-coronavirus-came-from-bats-and-wasnt-made-in-a-lab-141850>), as viruses routinely do, and became good at invading human cells.

It is easy to scare people by brandishing official documents that don't get fact-checked, but verification is easier than ever. I saw a very serious-looking French man on YouTube point to a Microsoft patent that showed, he told us, that Bill Gates was filing for protection of a system by which vaccines would be mixed with a microchip that would make us trackable by authorities ([WO 2020/060606 A1](https://patents.google.com/patent/WO2020/060606A1) (<https://patents.google.com/patent/WO2020060606A1/en>)). If you want a good laugh, click on the link. The application does not contain the words “vaccine”, “chip” or “inject.” It is a document explaining a way to mine for cryptocurrency (<https://www.dummies.com/personal-finance/what-is-cryptocurrency/>) in which computer labour is replaced by human body activity. Cryptocurrency, like Bitcoins, is a type of virtual money that is independent of governments and banks. Imagine if by playing a game on your phone, your phone detected the movement of blood in your brain, or the heat coming off your body, or changes in your facial expression, and used this “proof of work” to create new cryptocurrency units like Bitcoins. We are a far cry from Bill Gates injecting us with tracers. Fact-checking can actually be rewarding and we can all do our part to verify our information before sharing it on social media

Take-home message:

- A number of patents on “coronaviruses” are being used as proof by conspiracy-minded people online that the COVID-19 coronavirus was made in a laboratory
- The word “coronavirus” does not identify a single virus but rather an entire subfamily of viruses, and all of these patents are related to the SARS coronavirus or to coronaviruses that affect birds or pigs
- A recent Microsoft patent was claimed to describe the incorporation of microchips in vaccines, but the patent was about a way to mine for cryptocurrency using body activity

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