

WHO TO NOT CALL NOVEL CORONAVIRUS BY OFFICIAL NAME

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

A medical staffer works with test systems for the diagnosis of coronavirus, at the Krasnodar Center for Hygiene and Epidemiology microbiology lab in Krasnodar, Russia, Tuesday, Feb. 4, 2020. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

Three days after the novel coronavirus got an official name, the World Health Organization has clearly indicated that it will not use the official name in all its public communication while referring to the virus.

On February 11, the [WHO announced COVID-19](#) as the name for the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. The “CO” in COVID stands corona, while “VI” is for virus and “D” for disease. The number 19 stands for the year 2019 when the outbreak was first identified.

The same day, in a preprint posted in the bioRxiv repository, the Coronavirus Study Group of the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses announced the official name for the virus — “Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2” or “[SARS-CoV-2](#)”.

The Study Group had assessed the novelty of the virus to arrive at the name. The Coronavirus Study Group is responsible for developing the official classification of viruses and taxa naming of the Coronaviridae family to which the novel coronavirus belongs.

A news item published on February 12 in the journal *Science*, which was updated on February 13, now mentions that the WHO is “not happy” with the name given to the virus and hence is not planning to adopt it. It will instead call the pathogen “virus responsible for COVID-19” or the “[COVID-19 virus](#)”, a WHO spokesperson told *Science* via an email.

The WHO has clarified that neither of the two names that it plans to use to refer to the novel coronavirus is “intended as replacements for the official name of the virus” that the Study Group has chosen.

The reason why the WHO is not happy with the name and its refusal to use it while referring to the virus stems from the fact that the official name given to the virus has SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) mentioned in it. The SARS coronavirus, which was identified in 2003, first infected humans in the Guangdong province of southern China in 2002. The SARS epidemic spread to 29 countries and resulted in 8,096 laboratory confirmed cases and 774 deaths before it was contained in July 2003.

So, from a “risk communications perspective, using the name SARS can have unintended consequences in terms of creating unnecessary fear for some populations, especially in Asia, which was worst affected by the SARS outbreak in 2003”, the spokesperson told *Science*.

The WHO and the Study Group use two very different criteria and approaches while deciding the names. The WHO arrives at the name of a new disease by following the May 2015 guidelines. According to the guidelines, the disease name should not include geographic locations and people’s names as this can be stigmatising. Also, names of animals such as swine flu should be avoided as this leads to confusion. The guidelines also say that it should avoid “terms that incite undue fear” while choosing a name.

The Study Group adopts a “scientific approach” while naming a new coronavirus. Based on whole genome sequence shared by China and other countries, scientists have confirmed that the novel virus belongs to the same species as the one that caused the SARS epidemic, which is called SARS-related coronavirus.

“The virus may be novel to the rest of the world, but it isn’t really to taxonomists. So it’s not getting its own name. Instead, the committee appended a ‘2’ for viruses isolated from patients in Wuhan and elsewhere,” the chair of the Study Group John Ziebuhr of Justus Liebig University Giessen told *Science*.

According to *Science*, the paper was sent to bioRxiv repository on February 7, four days before it was posted on the repository. The authors had also sent the paper to a scientific journal for publication. After the outbreak, the WHO had requested all scientific journals to first share with it any paper that they receive before publishing. “Research findings relevant to the outbreak are shared immediately with the World Health Organization (WHO) upon journal submission, by the journal and with author knowledge,” notes a February 4 editorial in *Nature*.

So, the WHO was aware of the official name given by the Study Group to the novel coronavirus well before it announced the name of the disease. “The timing of WHO’s announcement was not influenced by the arrival of the manuscript,” the WHO spokesperson told *Science*.

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The WHO had to come up the name in line with the 2015 guidelines between the global agency, the World Organisation for Animal Health and the Food and Agriculture Organization.

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