Researchers Claim New Hep Virus Discovery Is False Alarm

October 3, 2013

Recent reports of a new strain of hepatitis virus have turned out to be false alarms, according to an article by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), whose researchers recently identified the new “virus” as a contaminant present in lab glassware. Earlier this year, a scientific team from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) thought they had found the cause behind 92 serious cases of hepatitis in China that were not caused by any of the five known hepatitis viruses (A, B, C, D and E). They named their discovery parvovirus-like hybrid virus (PHV) and credited “next-generation” DNA sequencing techniques for their discovery. However, in research published in the Journal of Virology, scientists at UCSF’s Viral Diagnostics and Discovery Center have traced the source of the “virus”/contamination back to microscopic diatoms (a type of ocean algae that has nothing to do with the human hepatitis virus), which were found in glass spin columns used to decode the test subjects’ biological data. UCSF researchers said the false-alarm scenario points out potential problems in trusting today’s powerful new techniques to track down diseases—because these new techniques can be just as liable to mistakes as traditional research methods, and because they still need good controls to ensure lab results are accurate.

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