Commentary

Long Before Suspicions Arose About A Lab Leak, Government Scientists Were Fiddling With Bugs to Make Them More Deadly

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Decades before the COVID outbreak when Americans first began hearing of dangerous “gain of function” virus studies, US bioweapons researchers were juicing up bugs to make them more deadly and contagious. Combing through historical military records, writer Kris Newby found evidence that this research may have fueled the rise of patients with Lyme disease—a sometimes chronic condition, with almost half a million new infections every year.

In her book, "Bitten: The Secret History of Lyme Disease and Biological Weapons", Newby pulls together various threads, including an interview and notes from the government researcher who first discovered Lyme disease, that point to the possibility that this condition is not what we believe it to be.1 This includes a 2001 talk on biological warfare given by a government scientist who ran a program at Fort Detrick and whose business card identified him as "Biological Warfare Consultant."2

After her book was published, a FOIA request she filed uncovered emails finding that officials at the National Institutes of Health tried to deep six her book. "They were trash-talking about me, like mean girls in middle school," Newby said of internal NIH emails. "Before the book was even out."

Kris Newby is an award-winning author and the senior producer of the Lyme disease documentary "Under Our Skin", which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award.3,4 Her book "Bitten" has won three international book awards and reads like a riveting thriller reminiscent of "The Hot Zone".1 It dives into the mystery surrounding one of the most controversial and misdiagnosed conditions of our time—Lyme disease.

Formerly a science writer with Stanford University, Newby is Communications Director at Invisible International, a nonprofit that educates health-care providers on diagnosing and treating vector-borne diseases.5 While packing across her living room, looking out over the snow-covered mountains of Park City, Utah, Newby told me that many academics have invested their credibility and careers in vaccines and tests that don’t work that well. "And even more important to them is that they published 300 papers saying 'Lyme Disease is easy to treat, easy to cure. And the tests are great, and the treatments are great.’” This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

THACKER: When did your documentary come out?

NEWBY: It came out at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2008. We did research and filming for three and a half years, and logged over 350 hours of video. It was a wild ride because I’d never done a documentary before.

THACKER: You had a successful documentary, Under Our Skin, that makes it to a top festival and then gets nominated for an Academy Award. Why then write a book?1

NEWBY: I was sick while I was doing the documentary, and I really couldn’t write very well at that point. After the film came out and I recovered, two sources came forward with information on the bug-borne weapons program, and at that point, I felt like I couldn’t walk away from such an important story.

THACKER: How sick? What does it mean to be sick with Lyme disease?

NEWBY: Both my husband and I had chronic Lyme disease. It’s sort of like having multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer’s, chronic fatigue ... joint pain, all at the same time.
Lyme disease is transmitted by a tick bite. It’s primarily a neurological disease that creates hyper-inflammation in your body. And the symptoms commonly move around your body. You can be very debilitated, unable to perform the tasks of a normal adult.

THACKER: In your book, you talk about getting used to dealing with symptoms, and then the symptoms change.

NEWBY: Correct. And in our fragmented medical system, you go to specialist after specialist racking up medical bills. Those specialists only see one part of your body, not the whole person. Then you start sounding like a hypochondriac.

You then get put in the psycho bucket.

THACKER: But then you’re done being sick, you’ve done a documentary, so then you write a book?

NEWBY: I wanted to get back into the real world, so I got a science writing job at Stanford. Over the next decade, they trained me on good story structure and how to stick to the facts.

But then at this party, a guy from the CIA’s "company" started talking about dropping infected ticks on Cuba during the Cold War. At that point, I knew I wasn’t done with the story.

THACKER: You’re at this party and there’s this former CIA guy bragging about an operation that involved dropping ticks on Cuba?

NEWBY: Right. In 1962, after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. During my film research, there were rumors swirling that Lyme was a bioweapon. It started with Michael Carroll’s book, "Lab 257", where he revealed that Plum Island used to be an animal bioweapons lab and that some of the ticks there may have gotten out.

When we started the film, Lyme disease was already too controversial to go down the bioweapons rabbit hole, so we focused on the human toll and the corruption in the medical system that allowed this epidemic to get so out of control.

This CIA guy was a little bit in his cups, but what he said rang true. I started doing some research, interviewed him several times, and found that it was a verifiable story.

We also filmed Willy Burgdorfer—the discoverer of Lyme disease—in 2007, in the dead of winter.

THACKER: He worked at Rocky Mountain Labs, a biolevel 4 facility in Montana?

NEWBY: Yes. He was retired. We flew out there to his house because we couldn’t get anyone from the NIH or the CDC to go on camera. We were setting up our lights and cameras for about 45 minutes. And then there was a pounding on the door; it was one of the people from Rocky Mountain Labs where he had worked his whole career. The visitor said he was told to sit in on the interview by someone at NIH.

And we said, "No, we’re not going to let you sit in."

It was a stressful confrontation—frightening. But he finally left and then Willy said things he might not have said otherwise. He said the NIH knows Lyme disease is chronically disabling. It’s more neurologically damaging to children who have developing neurological systems. And then at the end of the interview—with this evil little smile—he said, "I didn’t tell you everything."

So, we knew there was more to the story, but we had to get the film out.

THACKER: Your book documents a lot of circumstantial evidence that Lyme disease came about because of a bioweapons research program. What is this evidence?

NEWBY: The official story is that Willy Burgdorfer was sent to Lyme, Connecticut, and Long Island to research this crazy epidemic. In 1980, he discovered the Lyme spirochete and he said, "This is what’s causing the disease." He published an article in magazine and said that the organism is easily killed with penicillin.

I approached research for the book like an epidemiologist. At one point, I did an animation of the outbreak, and the point source for the beginning of the epidemic was the mouth of the Connecticut River, near Long Island. When I drew a 50-mile radius around that point, there were three new, highly virulent tick-borne diseases that showed up at that same time, in the late ’60s. This was 13 years before the Lyme bacterium was declared the cause of "Lyme disease" in 1981.

I started looking through military records to see if the outbreak could be tied to any bioweapons accidents. And that’s when I discovered this massive bug-borne weapons program, as well as a program where germs were sprayed from airplanes over large areas, called Project 112. Some of those germs were tick-borne diseases that they freeze-dried and aerosolized for spraying.

THACKER: We’re told today by government officials that there are no active offensive bioweapons programs, but reporters can’t go into those labs to confirm this. Most people don’t even know that we had a bioweapons program that Nixon shut down in the sixties. You spend a lot of time on
NEWBY: There was the Manhattan Project to develop the nuclear bomb, which ultimately ended World War II. And there was a parallel biological weapons program which they considered a more economical, stealthy way to conduct warfare. It was almost as large as the Manhattan Project, with the same rules of secrecy.

Nicholson Baker wrote a great book, "Baseless", looking into the question of whether we used insect-borne weapons in the Korean War. He puts together a pretty strong case. Whatever happened in Lyme, Connecticut, we don’t have all the details. But I put together a solid circumstantial case, based on available evidence.

THACKER: I didn’t realize that Nicholson Baker had written that book. He wrote the first piece in a major magazine arguing that COVID pandemic could have started from a lab leak. Your book describes an incident that was so horrific that Nixon shut down the bioweapons program.

NEWBY: That was Dugway Proving Grounds' “sheep kill.” In 1968, there was a chemical weapons accident in the Utah desert that killed over 6,000 sheep, but supposedly did not harm humans. They tried to contain that using the military’s playbook.

First, hope nobody notices. (But it was hard to sweep 6,000 dead sheep under the rug.)

Next, they shifted to a flat-out denial, claiming it was some plot cooked up by a Las Vegas mafia group to extract damages from the U.S. Army.

Then there was deflection: "Oh, the sheep died from pesticide spraying."

Eventually, it became an international incident because this spraying of deadly VX nerve agent was only 60 miles from Salt Lake City. It could have been a mass casualty event. Nixon had his hands full at that time with the Vietnam My Lai massacre. He and Kissinger put their heads together and came up with a strategy: To appease the public they canceled the biological weapons program.

But they didn’t cancel the chemical weapons program, and after the controversy blew over, Dugway just kept doing nerve gas experiments in the desert.

THACKER: One of the main characters in your book is Willy Burgdorfer from Switzerland, who got his PhD and then came to America and began working at the Rocky Mountain Lab. When he gets there in his twenties, Burgdorfer began working on contract for Fort Detrick, the headquarters for the U.S. chemical and biological weapons program.

I didn’t know all this history, but Rocky Mountain Lab, run by the National Institutes of Health, shows up in documents as collaborating on coronavirus research with Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance. This is the scientist who was working with researchers at the Wuhan Institute of Virology where the pandemic may have started.

So Rocky Mountain Labs are now part of the investigation into how the current pandemic started—they are involved in this coronavirus bat research.

NEWBY: Burgdorfer was Swiss-German with a degree in medical zoology from the Swiss Tropical Institute. He had worked with Q fever and ticks, experience that was needed at Rocky Mountain Labs for their bioweapons work. As soon
as he got a security clearance, he started putting plague in fleas; deadly yellow fever in mosquitoes; and then mixing and matching viruses and bacteria in ticks to increase the virulence of these living weapons.

The Detrick weapons designers were looking for ticks that could be dropped on an enemy without arousing suspicion, filled with agents for which the target population wouldn’t have natural immunity. This is what makes the COVID-19 virus so devastating. When a population is exposed to a new virulent germ, death and sickness will follow. Ticks were the perfect stealth weapon, untraceable and long-acting.

THACKER: You met him toward the end of his life and he seemed kind of wanting to tell you things, but then pulls back. But he hints that Lyme disease is a bioweapon.

NEWBY: He started hinting at the unnatural origin of the outbreak to several people, one of his friends who had been suffering from tick-borne diseases and a documentary filmmaker. When I interviewed him for the book, he said, "Yes, I was in the biological weapons program. I was tasked with trying to mass produce ticks and mosquitoes."

That’s also when he told me that he was called to investigate the outbreak of what was called "Lyme disease," but which could’ve been caused by one or more organisms.

In Army documents, they said they were conducting early gain-of-function experiments by mixing pathogens—bacteria and viruses—inside ticks to create more effective bioweapons.

THACKER: I first heard about Lyme disease about twenty years ago, when a guy I knew got it. I was living in Jersey City and it really screwed him up, caused all kinds of stress in his life. I think he got it from a park in the city.

Today, you’ll see all this yelling on social media that chronic Lyme disease is a "conspiracy" because it doesn’t exist. What is that all about? Who cares if it’s chronic or not? Why this need to dismiss chronic Lyme?

NEWBY: There is a growing body of scientific evidence that shows that the Lyme disease bacterium is a trickster that is good at dodging your immune system. It comes out of the tick in a very mobile spirochetal form and, when it senses an antibiotic or killer cells, it goes into a dormant cyst form, hiding out for months to years. And when your immune system is stressed, it can start causing disease again.

This isn’t the only organism that does that—herpes viruses do that too.

That was a focus of the film: “Why are they denying this chronic disease?” In my opinion, it’s because the U.S. passed a law—the Bayh Dole Act—that allows academic researchers, pharma, the CDC, and the NIH to become business partners and share in the profits of a new vaccine or test kit.

So here you have this disease discovered a couple of years after the Bayh Dole Act, and academic researchers get dollar signs in their eyes—they join in this unholy alliance with big pharma. In the past, academic researchers would race to publish their discoveries on a new dangerous pathogen. Instead, this information became intellectual property that could be profited from if it was kept secret.

THACKER: But what is the profit in denying that it’s chronic? Like, how do you profit off of that?

NEWBY: Well, if it’s chronic and relapsing, you can’t really have a vaccine that works effectively. Pharma realized it could make more money selling vaccines and blockbuster drugs that mask symptoms rather than treating the root cause. If you treat Lyme disease early on, most can be cured with $10 of off-patent doxycycline.

THACKER: Okay.

NEWBY: The original research for Lyme disease was done in the eighties, and I believe it was flawed. In her excellent book, "Cure Unknown", Pam Weintraub reports that the CDC desensitized the Lyme disease test so that the vaccine looked more effective in the clinical trial.8

We are now stuck with a 30-year-old, unreliable test. We have treatments that fail around a third of the time. Plus, there are now 500,000 new Lyme cases a year.

THACKER: What happened to the vaccine?

NEWBY: Around 2000, there were two vaccines in the works.9 The first one was pulled before it was released because of safety concerns. The second was released and there were reports of a lot of adverse effects. There was a settlement out of court, and Glaxo (now GlaxoSmithKline) never admitted fault. Then they pulled it from the market, saying...
there just wasn’t enough demand for it.

THACKER: The lawyer who sued on behalf of those patients who had been injured by the vaccine, I know this guy, because he's done a lot of pharma cases. But after Glaxo pulled the vaccine, this article appears in Vox claiming, “Aha! Because of these anti-vaxxers we can’t have a vaccine for Lyme.”

The lawyer who sued Glaxo had sued pharma companies over and over again for bad drugs. It’s what he does for a living.

But this dumb article in Vox morphed a bad product harming people into “anti-vaxxers strike again!” If you’re suing because you were hurt by a vaccine, duh, that means you got vaccinated. How does a reporter then morph you into “anti-vax?”

Where is this stupid narrative coming from? Smells like pharma.

NEWBY: Well, yes. This is pharma spin. But now there is a new vaccine in clinical trials and I really want that vaccine to work. And most Lyme disease patients want it to work. But it’s pretty much based on the same approach as the earlier failed vaccines. So, we’ll see what the evidence says.

The new clinical trial is using the same unreliable tests and the same mechanism of action—the vaccine makes its way inside the tick and kills the Lyme disease bacteria in its gut. Well, the tick is attached for two days before a vaccinated person’s blood might get into its gut and kill the bacteria. Meanwhile, there are 20 other pathogens transmitted by ticks that can hurt you—some can be transmitted in as little as one or 2 hours. These are pathogens like spotted fever and tularemia. So, is this vaccine really solving the problem and is it worth the cost?

THACKER: And this new vaccine will only stop people from getting Lyme disease, but what about those who already have it are stuck with it?

NEWBY: There are millions of people with chronic Lyme, and the NIH hasn’t funded a large treatment study for more than 20 years. In the last nine years, they spent less than 1% of the NIH Lyme budget on treatment studies. Today, the recommended treatment for Lyme disease is two to four weeks of antibiotics, and this fails about 30% of the time.

We’re spending all this NIH money on basic research and not addressing the problem of chronic disease.

THACKER: What else should people know about your book?

NEWBY: I went as far as I could as a journalist to put together the circumstantial evidence that says Lyme disease is not the big problem—meaning the bacteria called Borrelia burgdorferi. It’s what Burgdorfer said that they’re covering up: 1) that a different bacteria, perhaps a rickettsia related to Rocky Mountain spotted fever, was developed as a biowar in the Cold War; 2) that it might be a combination of bugs inside the ticks that is making people sick.

One of the most outrageous bioweapons experiments, which was hiding in plain sight, was an Army-funded study to see how far ticks would spread if dropped behind enemy lines. A university researcher near Norfolk, Virginia, released hundreds of thousands of radioactive ticks on the Atlantic bird flyway to see how far they would travel over months and years.

There were no guard rails on this study. The researcher made pregnant ticks radioactive—they would lay 2000 to 4000 eggs each—the radioactive larval ticks were then released on a grid in a swampy region. Every month he would go out to collect the ticks, and using a Geiger counter, see how far they traveled. Then he’d return the ticks to the field, so they could keep moving.

Who knows if the radiation caused mutations in the ticks or their microbial hitchhikers? What’s worse, he was using aggressive lone star ticks, which before these experiments were only living below the Mason-Dixon line. After the experiments, they were carried by birds to New England.

When lone star ticks reached the north, I believe they caused the Rocky Mountain spotted fever outbreak in the seventies, with people dying on Long Island. Now they’re creeping up through Maine and Canada.

THACKER: How was your book received when it came out in May of 2019?

NEWBY: HarperCollins sent it out to many reviewers but there was a deafening silence. It had no mainstream media reviews. This was the beginning of “fake news” so it seemed like just another crazy conspiracy theory.

Then Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey waved it around on C-SPAN and said, “Hey, this is credible information, and I’m going to launch an investigation into bug-borne weapons.” Lyme disease has been devastating to New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts, and it’s spreading.

Then it became an international laughing stock. Just to say the words “weaponized tick” sounds ridiculous. [Laughs] Even though it happened.

That’s when a government disinformation campaign began to discredit the author, me.

THACKER: You filed Freedom of Information requests with the NIH. Why did you do that?

NEWBY: I was hoping more evidence of their knowledge of the weapons program would come out. The topic is still classified and only certain people are read into what happened.

Congressman Smith had written a letter to the NIH and said, “Can you please clarify what happened?” And they developed a response internally. I believe that the essence of this response ended up as a Washington Post op-ed that was published by Sam Telford.

THACKER: What were they saying about you at the NIH?

NEWBY: They were saying the book was fake news, total
fiction. How could Stanford let someone publish something like this? Because, at the time, I was still working for Stanford. They were trash-talking about me, like mean girls in middle school, before the book was even out.

THACKER: So then, Telford, an NIH-funded researcher, publishes a piece on you in The Conversation, which then was picked up by the Washington Post.

NEWBY: It’s an op-ed that says Lyme disease as a bioweapon was a conspiracy theory. They linked it to my book’s marketing book page. And then he said, "It couldn’t have happened. There was an iceman in the Alps at the end of the last ice age, and he had Borrelia in him, so it couldn’t be weaponized." On and on like that.

I called up the author right after it came out to discuss some of the many inaccuracies in the op-ed, and I said, "Hey, Dr. Telford, did you ever read my book?"

He said, "No, I don’t have time to read books."

So, he had written this, ostensibly discrediting my book, deflecting from the hypothesis that Lyme disease wasn’t a bioweapon—it was a different, engineered organism, call it the original lab leak, that they were trying to hide.

He’s a tick expert; he teaches biosecurity. He’s written many studies about tularemia, a known tick-borne bioweapon. And he denies the documented evidence in my book?

He writes for the Washington Post, "We’ve never had any military open-air tests or releases of bioweapons in the United States." Total lie. Anyone with Google can read about these open-air tests of germs by the military because the Washington Post reported on it in 1977.11

When I contacted the Washington Post editors, they told me they don’t fact-check op-eds, and they wouldn’t change it. Now it has been propagated across the Internet to make my book "fake news."

THACKER: You wrote a point-by-point rebuttal of his piece that both Laura Helmuth at the Washington Post and Beth Daly at The Conversation then ignored.12 You sent them an unclassified 1953 defense report that discusses this research at Rocky Mountain Labs to make tick borne diseases more dangerous.13
Passage of BW agents through various arthropods offers an opportunity to increase the virulence of the agents or to alter certain of their characteristics. This has been studied under contract at the USPHS Rocky Mountain Laboratory in Montana. Tularemia, Q fever, and plague have been passed through appropriate vectors and the resulting strains are being compared with the original strains supplied by the Biological Laboratories. Q fever rickettsiae multiplied so rapidly in the tick Dermacentor andersoni that the majority of the test ticks died. The Rocky Mountain Laboratory also offers a site for studying transmission of yellow fever in mosquitoes.

Studies are in process to demonstrate the capability of arthropods to act as efficient means of overt dissemination of BW agents. The agents selected are lethal for humans and include mosquito transmitted yellow fever, Japanese B encephalitis, Eastern and Venesulan equine encephalitis, louse transmitted epidemic typhus, flea transmitted bubonic plague, and tick transmitted Rocky Mountain spotted fever. All of the vectors for these diseases have been reared in large numbers and millions can be produced and infected. Virulence of the agents and ability to infect lasts

But one of the main things you note is that Telford failed to disclose his funding and the kind of research he does. Who is he really?

NEWBY: He’s a tick researcher at Tufts University who specializes in the tick-borne select agent bioweapon, tularemia. He was the director of a bio-level 3 lab in Groton, Massachusetts, that works on dangerous, tick-borne diseases on the government’s select agent list. And he didn’t disclose that he’s funded by the NIH and the military-industrial complex. Of course, in the sleepy suburb of Groton, Massachusetts, he doesn’t want people to know that whatever is in his lab could get out.

THACKER: I’ll bet he doesn’t. (To read Newby’s footnoted rebuttal to Telford’s essay in the Washington Post, click here.)

NEWBY: I called the Post’s editors; I’ve written them multiple times. I said everything about this piece violates your own op-ed guidelines, and yet they won’t fix it. The only thing they did was remove the link to my book marketing page.

THACKER: Where are we now with Lyme disease and what are you planning next? Or are you kind of done? You’ve worked on a documentary, you’ve written a book. What should people know?

NEWBY: I’m discouraged at how little progress has been made, but I’m optimistic for the future. I think some better tests are coming out. They’re very close to getting into the FDA for approval, and then commercial availability. It’s going to be a come to Jesus moment when those tests come out. It’s time to realize how many people are suffering from tick borne diseases.

I think my job is mostly done. I’m working on a new book talking about lab leaks and the government strategy for cover up, so people know what’s going on and we can prevent them in the future. To support my book, I’m working half time at a nonprofit, working on medical education that’s free to everyone: Invisible International for Invisible Diseases.

We’re finding the experts who are really good at treating these diseases early on, and bottling their knowledge in

On Mar 19, 2022, at 8:58 AM, Barr, Cameron <cameron.barr@washpost.com> wrote:

Dear Kris Newby,

I’ve received from Michael Larabee your request that we review a 2019 piece that mentioned your work. We’ll look into the matter next week and get back to you.

Cameron Barr

Cameron Barr | Senior Managing Editor
The Washington Post
these free online video courses. To me, that's helping the problem of misdiagnosis.

The ivory tower academics have a lot to lose, if the truth is out. They have patents on tests and vaccines. And even more important to them is that they published 300 papers saying "Lyme Disease is easy to treat, easy to cure. And the tests are great and the treatments are great."

So they have a lot to lose.

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