

NO COVER-UP: HOLMES

# Scientist's 'Wuhan memory problem'

EXCLUSIVE

SHARRI MARKSON SKY NEWS HOST

Leading Australian virologist Edward Holmes said a "bad memory" was behind the reason he didn't disclose he was listed on a paper submitted to medical journals alongside a Wuhan Institute of Virology scientist.

Professor Holmes was co-author of a paper titled the Proximal Origins of SARS-CoV-2 that claimed Covid-19 was a natural virus and "improbable" it was a laboratory construct. But when authorising that paper, he did not disclose his work on a previous paper with a Wuhan scientist.

He said he forgot his name was listed on a January 2018 paper about bat coronaviruses with a Wuhan Institute of Virology researcher, Jie Cui, a former post-doctoral student of his. The paper was rejected by multiple medical journals and never published.

Professor Holmes later blamed his "bad memory" and said it was an "extraordinary story."

"It shows my bad memory... In late July this year, these 163 new bat coronavirus sequences appeared on GenBank for the Wuhan Institute of Virology, with no paper, just this kind of posting," he said in an online interview in September 2022.

"The really shocking thing is my name is on the GenBank submission. When I saw this, I thought, 'What is this?'. I could not, I couldn't compute, thinking why am I on this. And then I look back, and... it turns out there was actually a paper that was never published. He (Mr Jie) did this one study on bat coronaviruses that they'd sequenced."

The unpublished paper included the partial sequence of RaTG13, one of the closest known genetic relatives to SARS-CoV-2. "I think it gives you a snapshot of what they were working on in that lab the year before the pandemic starts," Professor Holmes said, claiming they were working on SARS.

A key basis for Professor Holmes's position that Covid-19 was not lab-engineered is a claim the Wuhan Institute has no progenitor virus to SARS-CoV-2.

Declassified intelligence repeatedly states the Wuhan Institute was working on classified projects for the Chinese military that are not in the public domain.

The Wuhan Institute took its virus database offline in September 2019 and has never made it public, even to health officials.

On April 16, 2020, the University of Sydney released a statement from Professor Holmes prompted by "unfounded specu-

lation on the origins" of Covid-19. "There is no evidence that SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes Covid-19 in humans, originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China," he said in the statement.

"The abundance, diversity and evolution of coronaviruses in wildlife strongly suggests that this virus is of natural origin."

One of his co-authors of the Proximal Origins paper, in an email, disputed that there would be a "signature" of laboratory manipulation, making the point that he conducts genetic engineering and doesn't leave a trace.

During the email discussion between the scientists, Ron Fouchier, from the Erasmus Medical Centre in Rotterdam, disagreed with fellow scientist Andrew Rambaut that the sequence data "clearly and unambiguously rules out any form of lab construct or engineering of the virus".

Professor Fouchier stated: "Molecular biologists like myself can generate perfect copies of viruses without leaving a trace... The arguments for and against passing and engineering are the same if you ask me."

When discussing the order of the scientists' names to be listed on the Proximal Origins paper, Professor Holmes wrote: "I'd be nervous about putting my name there (last) as I am amateur on the specific virological stuff we discuss. I feel I have only contributed to the writing."

The Proximal Origins paper was used by governments, intelligence agencies and senior health officials to publicly counter questions over whether Covid-19 had inadvertently leaked from a Wuhan laboratory that houses the world's largest collection of coronaviruses and was conducting risky gain-of-function research.

In response to questions from The Australian, Professor Holmes said accusations of a cover-up by the scientific community are "wrong, misleading and suggest a lack of understanding of scientific concepts, process and rigour".

"Mounting scientific evidence continues to make it clear that a lab leak is an unsubstantiated allegation and was classified as 'extremely unlikely' by the World Health Organisation origins investigation. I stand by the conclusions made in the Proximal Origins paper," he told The Australian.

"Calls to retract the paper are baseless and entirely unwarranted."



# Renewable energy potential fuels far west population boom

PAUL GARVEY

Towns in regional Western Australia are seeing population booms of more than 300 per cent as Australians look to the likes of Geraldton and York for a better life.

The Regional Australia Institute has found sustained strong growth in the regional jobs market and the low cost of housing in more remote parts of the country are helping fuel the interest in growth hotspots such as the industrial port of Geraldton 370km north of Perth.

The crayfishing and farming town of 40,000 is eyeing renewable energy and hydrogen and has experienced a 395 per cent rise in total net internal migration inflows in the past 12 months.

Geraldton Mayor Shane Van Styn told The Australian that his town is "the centre of the universe right now". In recent days, Mr Van Styn has had meetings with several of the biggest players from the worlds of renewable energy and hydrogen, all of whom, he says, are keen to get into an area that has been identified as abundant in wind and solar energy potential. Regional WA has three of the



top five locations for internal migration in the June quarter. Geraldton is the biggest hotspot - the number of internal migrants climbed 6 per cent since the March quarter - but there were also big influges recorded in Waroona, 100km south of Perth, and

York, 86km east of Perth. Waroona saw net migration spike by 206 per cent, while York grew by 152 per cent.

The other big leaps in net migration in the quarter were Townsville, with a 164 per cent spurt, and mid-western regional NSW, with the second-biggest net migration leap of 236 per cent.

The Regional Australia Institute says that in 2020, 67 per cent of people thought regional living would give them more time for themselves. In 2023, this jumped to 74 per cent. At the same time, net dissatisfaction with city life is up, and more people are now wor-

ried about cost-of-living pressures in the city.

Cost-of-living pressures in Sydney and Melbourne in particular were cited as a reason for people moving.

RAI chief executive Liz Ritchie said the shift to WA's bush towns show "the love affair with regional living is far from over".

"In June, there were more than 87,000 jobs advertised online in regional Australia. The old myth that there aren't any jobs in the regions just isn't true," she said on Monday. "The inflows we're seeing into regional areas, particularly in those Western Australian

hotspots, shows people know they won't compromise, and can often advance their careers in a regional context."

Moving from cities to regions took on a new desirability during the lockdowns of 2020-21, but RAI chief economist Kim Houghton said the latest data showed regional migration still sits higher than pre-pandemic levels.

"It's not just a flash in the pan," Dr Houghton said. "We expect regional areas to continue to attract city movers as commercial businesses in core sectors and agribusinesses alike step up their push for workers."



Emma Covacevich is the first female chief executive partner at Clayton Utz, one of the biggest law firms in Australia

JOHN FEDER

# 'Women in, men out': brief for parity

EXCLUSIVE

ELLIE DUDLEY LEGAL AFFAIRS CORRESPONDENT

For Clayton Utz's first female chief executive partner, achieving gender parity is simple: "It's about more women coming in and more men going out."

Emma Covacevich, who has "diversity and inclusion" written in bold across the top of her lengthy agenda to shake up the 190-year-old firm, admits it may be a "crude" way of looking at the problem but says the firm needs to be making more "conscious decisions" when it comes to hiring. "But also we need to be making those decisions in a way that

doesn't disengage our male employees," she says. "That's a challenging issue because we've got so many good guys coming through and we want to make sure there are career opportunities for them as well."

It's a challenge on the minds of legal business leaders everywhere and Covacevich is hardly alone in trying to tackle the issue of how to drag up female representation across the workplace.

The Australian's Legal Partnership Survey, released on Tuesday, reveals the number of female lawyers slowly is creeping upwards, with women representing 33 per cent of partners (up 2 per cent on last year), 61 per cent of graduates (up 0.1 per cent) and 29 per cent of equity partners (up 2 per cent). But the issue poses a

unique challenge for Clayton Utz.

While the company's female graduate representation was reported at 3 per cent above average (65 per cent), the percentage of female partners was 4 per cent below (29 per cent), despite the firm being 1 per cent up from six months ago. Covacevich, who is only three weeks into her job, is well aware of the shortfall. "Where there is an opportunity for us to do better is obviously in our female partner numbers," she says. "Again, that's around making conscious decisions, and the numbers will settle as some of our older male partners retire."

Having begun her career with Clayton Utz in 1999 as an articled clerk, Covacevich was one of the youngest employees to be appointed partner, at 29.

After a stint as general counsel of Australia Pacific LNG from 2011 to 2013, she returned to the firm and became one of her predecessor Bruce Cooper's two deputy chief executives. The other was Douglas Bishop, brother of former foreign minister Julie Bishop who was a senior member of the firm before pursuing her political career.

As leader, Covacevich is looking to improve the overall culture, image and position of the firm. She is careful to state her concrete plans but she mentions a rebrand may be in the works. Asked whether she is concerned about a chicken-or-egg scenario where fewer women apply to Clayton Utz because fewer women are employed there, Covacevich replies: "I'm absolutely concerned."

"If we don't get diversity and inclusion right, then we're just not an attractive proposition," she says. "The benefits of diversity are well understood, and anyone who doesn't think that is a dinosaur."

"The ability for us to equip top quality legal work and to mesh and gel with our clients very much depends on the fact we have a workforce that looks like our clients, that thinks like our clients or thinks a little bit different to our clients. If we don't get that right, and it's the same with any firm, then it doesn't make us very attractive at all."

"That's not why we're doing it, we're doing it because it's the right thing to do, but there's a number of flow-on effects."

BUSINESS P13

# Date set for trial over Cassius death

The four people accused of killing Noongar Yamatji schoolboy Cassius Turvey will spend at least another 20 months on remand as they await trial.

Jack Brearley, 22, Aleesha Gilmore, 21, Mitchell Forth, 25, and Brodie Palmer, 28, appeared in Western Australia's Supreme Court on Monday, charged over the teen's death. The four accused all pleaded not guilty in their previous court appearance in May.

On Monday, they were given a trial date of February 10. The legal battle is expected to run for nearly two months.

The four alleged killers deny murdering 15-year-old Cassius while he was on his way home from school on October 13 in the eastern Perth suburb of Middle Swan.

He died of his injuries in hospital 10 days after being attacked on a suburban street.

A fifth man, Ethan MacKenzie, 19, also appeared during Monday's hearing.

He is not charged with murder, but is facing charges of aggravated unlawful wounding and detaining another 15-year-old in relation to an alleged kidnapping incident in the days leading up to the alleged attack on Cassius.

NCA NEWSWIRE

# Childcare fees jump as subsidy kicks in

EXCLUSIVE

NATASHA BITA EDUCATION EDITOR

Daycare centres slapped parents with fee rises of more than 15 per cent just as the federal government increased taxpayer subsidies, a new survey shows.

The Parenthood has revealed that higher charges for childcare are wiping out the savings from higher subsidies, adding to soaring living costs for families.

Fees increased for 90 per cent of the 548 parents surveyed by the parental advocacy group in July.

"It is a coincidence that some childcare providers increased their fees by more than 10 per cent just at the very same time the federal government raised the childcare subsidy?" The Parenthood acting chief executive Jessica Rudd said on Monday.

"Opportunistic fee hikes are eating up the potential improvements to family household budgets."

Ms Rudd said that fee rises of 8 or 9 per cent would be "reasonable" given that childcare providers are having to pay higher wages, rents or mortgages and electricity costs.

But The Parenthood's survey

found that fees had risen by more than 15 per cent for one in every 14 families.

Nearly a third of families were slugged with fee increases above 10 per cent in July.

"This is simply unacceptable when Australians already pay some of the highest childcare fees in the world," Ms Rudd said.

"It is not fair, nor acceptable, that some providers seek to profit from the government's investment of \$5.4bn at the expense of parents, taxpayers and early childhood educators."

"What is even more disappointing is that these fee increases have not resulted in any material wage increase for early childhood educators, who continue to be undervalued and underpaid."

The Albanese government increased the maximum subsidy for childcare fees to cover 90 per cent of parent's costs, from July 1.

It has asked the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission to report on childcare pricing by the end of this year, while the Productivity Commission is investigating a new model for delivering early childhood education.

Many childcare workers earn little more than the minimum wage, which rose 5.75 per cent last month.

# China complains over probe into WeChat

Continued from Page 1

earlier and confirming that the select committee on foreign interference through social media is unable to compel foreign entities to participate in a hearing, nor answer questions in writing," the DFAT official said in the email.

"One additional detail that would (be) helpful to know is how best to characterise a decision by a foreign company not to participate in a hearing. We have seen suggestions that declining to participate in a hearing would 'demonstrate contempt' for parliament and would welcome confirmation of if this is accurate."

Throughout the inquiry, senators heard expert evidence that WeChat engages in surveillance, censorship and foreign interference on its platform. In the public hearings, Senator Paterson said WeChat had "demonstrated contempt for the parliament of Australia" by declining to front the inquiry.

The Senate has powers to compel witnesses to attend a public hearing, though they do not apply extra-territorially. WeChat has no Australian-based employees, which meant the committee was unable to compel the platform to participate.

The report's release comes as Prime Minister Anthony Alba-

nese weighs an invitation to visit China later this year, as the two governments work to dismantle coercive trade sanctions imposed on Australian goods by Beijing.

China's ambassador to Australia Xiao Qian said relations between the two countries were at a "critical juncture" recently and called on the Albanese government to "stay on the right path to get along".

Social media giants Meta - which owns Facebook and Instagram - Twitter, TikTok, Google and YouTube fronted the committee during the inquiry.

The Australian spokeswoman for China-based platform TikTok, Ella Woods-Joyce, repeatedly evaded senators' questions about the company's ties to Beijing and denied the video-sharing app had been asked to supply users' data.

However, Senator Paterson pointed out this would be in breach of Chinese law.

Senator Paterson sent a list of more than 50 detailed questions to WeChat asking if it had any Chinese Communist Party members on its board, if it censors criticism of the Chinese government or cooperates with Australian authorities in relation to foreign interference or espionage offences conducted on the platform.

# Timeline key to disease doubt

EXCLUSIVE

CHARLIE PEEL RURAL REPORTER

Indonesian authorities say it is unlikely 13 Australian cattle that tested positive for the highly infectious lumpy skin disease contracted the virus and became infectious within the five days they were in the country.

The short timeframe between arriving aboard live export vessels and testing positive is behind Indonesia's suspension of imports from four export facilities in Australia.

Australian authorities are adamant the disease is not present in Northern Australia and say that it is probable the 13 cattle contracted the virus within the five-day timeframe or even on board the export ship.

"This is the point of conflict with Indonesia, that the textbook says between five and 15 days for an incubation period," Chief Veterinary Officer Mark Schipp told The Australian.

"Indonesia is saying, 'Well, these cattle are testing positive, five days ago we didn't have them, you had them, so they must have been infected in Australia'."

"We're arguing that the test that they're using is sensitive enough to detect early infection, or that they've been vaccinated and we know that some of these cattle were vaccinated after arrival before they were tested."

Australia is working to allay Indonesia's concerns and to remove the suspension.

It has increased cattle testing at the four yards in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia. The government is confident the disease is not in Australia and hopes to have the suspension lifted within two weeks.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry estimates a serious outbreak of lumpy skin disease in Australia would cost the economy \$7.39bn.

"Indonesia has suspended four of the export yards until we complete an investigation, so to do that we're testing cattle out of those yards and that's commenced today," Dr Schipp said.

"We're collecting about 65 samples from each of those lots of cattle and they'll be tested at the regional laboratories and then again at the national reference laboratory in Geelong that's run by CSIRO. Once we have those results, we'll provide those to Indonesia."

The suspension of the four export facilities at the height of the live export season to Indonesia has caused significant disruptions to exporters.

Lumpy skin disease can cause significant production losses in cattle and is easily spread by biting insects. A local outbreak would severely disrupt trade relationships and could also affect meat and dairy exports.

Nationals leader David Littleproud called for calm and said he was confident Australia remained free of the disease.

"I'm very confident the testing will prove that the cattle that have tested positive were in yards in Indonesia for a number of days," he said. "I think it's important that we demonstrate that with science, that we give our trading partners that certainty."

"I think we need to create that environment for the department to be able to undertake that but I'm very confident in our science."

DIGITAL

Read Amanda Hodge's analysis article

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