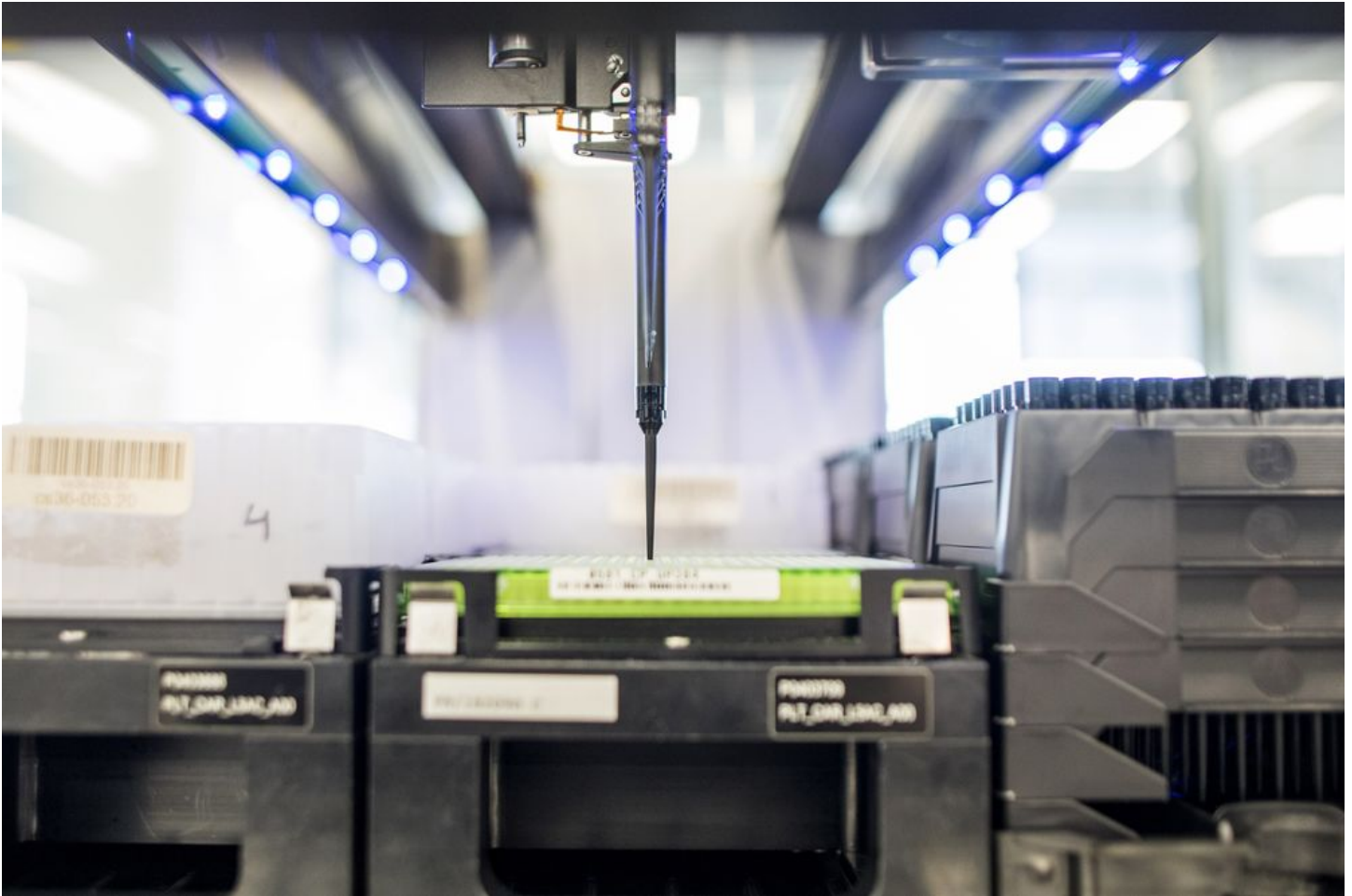


Newsletter

Tool Used to Rule Out Foul Play With Covid-19 May Spot Bioweapons



Ginkgo Bioworks is making genetic products to help prevent new types of dangerous biological weapons. *Photographer: Scott Eisen/Bloomberg*

By [Riley Griffin](#)

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Hi, it's Riley. I'm writing fresh off a trip to Boston where I spoke with intelligence officials about their plan to suss out man-made biological threats.

Today's must-reads

Novavax's [Covid-19 booster](#) was authorized for US adults ahead of a potential wave of cases this winter.

[Couch potatoes](#) ring up \$27 billion in annual health costs, according to the World Health Organization.

A Planned Parenthood employee responsible for expanding the organization's visibility among Black and Latinx communities [says she was fired](#) after complaining about systemic racial discrimination.

How intelligence agents know what they know

Covid-19 wasn't developed as a biological weapon.

That's what the US intelligence community said in a [report](#) on the virus's origins that was released a year ago. I uncovered more about how that verdict was reached this week when I traveled to Boston to learn about how the intelligence community is [hunting for man-made biological weapons](#).

"As soon as people began getting Covid in the United States, rumors began suggesting, 'This was engineered. This is an attack,'" says David Markowitz, a program manager at the Intelligence Advanced Research Projects Activity, a high-risk research agency within the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

Markowitz's team had the tools to figure out whether that was true. His agency had contracted years earlier with synthetic-biology firm Ginkgo Bioworks, academics and a nonprofit group. Their goal was to develop technology to detect whether an organism – like a virus, bacteria, animal or crop – had been genetically engineered. The tools were designed to identify human fingerprints left behind in genetic code.

So, when SARS-CoV-2's genome sequence was first made available, IARPA put one of its evolving tools to the test. It took just 8 minutes for the platform developed by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University to spit out crucial evidence about the virus's genetic instructions.

"It didn't show the hallmarks of engineering," Markowitz says of that analysis in late January 2020, before many Americans had even heard of Covid-19.

This same technology will have important applications moving forward.

The Biden administration on Tuesday unveiled [a new National Biodefense Strategy](#) with clearer instructions on how to defend against biological threats, from naturally occurring infectious diseases to man-made weapons of mass destruction. The framework seeks to better define the government’s responsibilities, objectives and deadlines in a crisis, and places the White House at the center of the response.

One of the administration’s goals is to identify and hold bad actors accountable when they develop and use biological weapons. The technology developed by IARPA could help with that.

“Nation-states and terrorist groups have found value in pursuing biological weapons,” the National Biodefense Strategy warns, “and there can be no confidence that will change in the future.” – [Riley Griffin](#)

What we’re reading

When a 10-year-old girl complained of mysterious pain, a doctor suspected Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a rare condition in which a parent deliberately makes a child ill in order to get sympathy. [The Cut examines](#) how far the doctor would go to prove it.

A top CDC scientist said an obscure health policy used to expel migrants is unfairly stigmatized them as spreading Covid-19, [CBS News reports](#).

NPR looks at how American families are face challenges finding and [paying for mental-health care](#), and then ending up debt-ridden.

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