A recent CNN article (Fox, 2020) focuses on the story of a probable index COVID-19 case in an outbreak suspected (and then linked) to Flight VN54 from London to Hanoi on March 2nd, 2020. It cites an early release study in the journal Emerging Infectious Diseases from Vietnam’s National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology; the observational study seeks primarily to assess the role of in-flight SARS-CoV-2 transmission by investigating and tracing cases among passengers (Khanh et al., 2020).

***The study sample was self-selected, in that it was limited to the people on flight VN54 on March 2nd from London to Hanoi (and their contacts upon landing).*** 217 airline crew and passengers were traced, tested via PCR, and interviewed. Additionally, 33 people (16%) had left Vietnam and were unable to be included (and it is possible that these people may systematically different from people who were included in the analysis, in a way relevant to the outcome).Finally, while investigation included other potential infection contexts, without genomic analysis the authors are unable to rule out alternatives (such as fomites) to suspected in-flight infection.

Regarding the CNN article, the facts are presented in a truncated narrative and sensationalized way. Phrases like "The investigators said there was no other likely way any of the 15 others could have been infected other than exposure to the sick patient on the flight," ring false, given the Discussion section in the study publication contradicts this. A related Forbes article provides a more balanced approach, and even mentions some limitations of the study. However, all reporting urges caution about long flights, which is prudent.

The generalizability of the study plays an important role in understanding how seriously one ought to take the results in relation to its findings. The study finds that Flight VN54 was an important context for COVID-19 spread; people more proximal to the index case had much higher attack rates, and even people farther away seem to have been infected by aerosolized particles. However, this was conducted before wearing masks was instituted on flights and in airports, so this pattern may or may not take the same form under more recent conditions.

1. Fox, Maggie. Coronavirus can spread on airline flights, two studies show. *CNN*, Cable News Network, 18 Sept. 2020 [cited 19 September 2020]. www.cnn.com/2020/09/18/health/coronavirus-airline-transmission-studies/index.html.
2. Khanh NC, Thai PQ, Quach H-L, Thi NA-H, Dinh PC, Duong TN, et al. Transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 during long flight. Emerg Infect Dis. 2020 Nov [cited 19 September 2020]. https://doi.org/10.3201/eid2611.203299