1	Viable SARS-CoV-2 in the air of a hospital room with COVID-19 patients
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27 Summary

28	Background There currently is substantial controversy about the role played by SARS-CoV-2 in aerosols
29	in disease transmission, due in part to detections of viral RNA but failures to isolate viable virus from
30	clinically generated aerosols.
31	Methods Air samples were collected in the room of two COVID-19 patients, one of whom had an active
32	respiratory infection with a nasopharyngeal (NP) swab positive for SARS-CoV-2 by RT-qPCR. By using
33	VIVAS air samplers that operate on a gentle water-vapor condensation principle, material was collected
34	from room air and subjected to RT-qPCR and virus culture. The genomes of the SARS-CoV-2 collected
35	from the air and of virus isolated in cell culture from air sampling and from a NP swab from a newly
36	admitted patient in the room were sequenced.
37	Findings Viable virus was isolated from air samples collected 2 to 4.8m away from the patients. The
38	genome sequence of the SARS-CoV-2 strain isolated from the material collected by the air samplers was
39	identical to that isolated from the NP swab from the patient with an active infection. Estimates of viable
40	viral concentrations ranged from 6 to 74 TCID ₅₀ units/L of air.
41	Interpretation Patients with respiratory manifestations of COVID-19 produce aerosols in the absence of
42	aerosol-generating procedures that contain viable SARS-CoV-2, and these aerosols may serve as a source
43	of transmission of the virus.
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53 Research in context

54 Evidence before this study

55 Various studies report detection of SARS-CoV-2 in material collected by air samplers positioned in

- 56 clinics and in some public spaces. For those studies, detection of SARS-CoV-2 has been by indirect
- 57 means; instead of virus isolation, the presence of the virus in material collected by air samplers has been
- 58 through RT-PCR detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA. However, questions have been raised about the clinical
- significance of detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA, particularly as airborne viruses are often inactivated by
- 60 exposure to UV light, drying, and other environmental conditions, and inactivated SARS-CoV-2 cannot
- 61 cause COVID-19.

62 Added value of this study

Our virus isolation work provides direct evidence that SARS-CoV-2 in aerosols can be viable and thus pose a risk for transmission of the virus. Furthermore, we show a clear progression of virus-induced cytopathic effects in cell culture, and demonstrate that the recovered virus can be serially propagated. Moreover, we demonstrate an essential link: the viruses we isolated in material collected in four air sampling runs and the virus in a newly admitted symptomatic patient in the room were identical. These findings strengthen the notion that airborne transmission of viable SARS-CoV-2 is likely and plays a critical role in the spread of COVID-19.

70 Implications of all the available evidence

Scientific information on the mode of transmission should guide best practices Current best practices for limiting the spread of COVID-19. Transmission secondary to aerosols, without the need for an aerosolgenerating procedure, especially in closed spaces and gatherings, has been epidemiologically linked to exposures and outbreaks. For aerosol-based transmission, measures such as physical distancing by 6 feet would not be helpful in an indoor setting and would provide a false-sense of security. With the current surges of cases, to help stem the COVID-19 pandemic, clear guidance on control measures against SARS-CoV-2 aerosols are needed.

79 Introduction

80	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), genus Betacoronavirus, subgenus
81	Sarbecovirus, family Coronaviridae, is a positive-polarity single-stranded RNA virus that probably
82	originated in bats ¹⁻³ and is the causative agent of coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19). ⁴ The
83	dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic have proven to be complex. Many challenges remain pertaining to
84	a better understanding of the epidemiology, pathology, and transmission of COVID-19. For example, the
85	clinical manifestations of COVID-19 range from an asymptomatic infection, mild respiratory illness to
86	pneumonia, respiratory failure, multi-organ failure, and death. ⁵⁻⁷ Diarrhea due to gastro-intestinal
87	infection can also occur, and <i>in vitro</i> modeling suggests that the virus infects human gut enterocytes. ⁸
88	SARS-CoV-2 RNA can be found in rectal swabs and fecal aerosols, even after nasal-pharyngeal testing
89	has turned negative, ⁹⁻¹² suggesting that a fecal–oral transmission route may be possible.
90	To-date, there has been a strong emphasis on the role of respiratory droplets and fomites in the
91	transmission of SARS-CoV-2. ^{13,14} Yet SARS-CoV-2 does not appear to be exclusively inhaled as a
92	droplet, and epidemiologic data are consistent with aerosol transmission of SARS-CoV-2.15-19
93	Furthermore, SARS-CoV-2 genomic RNA has been detected in airborne material collected by air
94	samplers positioned distal to COVID-19 patients. ^{9, 20-23} Any respiratory virus that can survive
95	aerosolization poses an inhalation biohazard risk, and van Doremalen et al. ²⁴ experimentally generated
96	aerosol particles with SARS-CoV-2 and found that the virus remained viable during a three-hour testing
97	period. More recently, Fears et al. ²⁵ reported that the virus retained infectivity and integrity for up to 16
98	hours in laboratory-created respirable-sized aerosols. Nevertheless, finding virus RNA in material
99	collected by an air sampler may not correlate with risk. Indeed, the air we breathe is full of viruses
100	(animal, plant, bacterial, human, etc.), yet a large proportion of the viruses in air are non-viable due to
101	UV-inactivation, drying, etc., and non-viable viruses cannot cause illnesses. Because efforts to isolate
102	virus in cell cultures in the aforementioned air sampling studies in hospital wards were not made, ^{20,22} or
103	failed when they were attempted due to overgrowth by faster replicating respiratory viruses, ²³ or provided

weak evidence of virus isolation,²¹ uncertainties about the role of aerosols in COVID-19 transmission
 remain.

106 It is well known that virus particles collected by various air samplers become inactivated during the air 107 sampling process,²⁶ and if such is the case for SARS-CoV-2, this partly explains why it has been difficult 108 to prove that SARS-CoV-2 collected from aerosols is viable. Because we previously collected SARS-109 CoV-2 from the air of a respiratory illness ward within a clinic but were unable to isolate the virus in cell cultures due to out-competition by other respiratory viruses,²³ we sought to perform air sampling tests in a 110 111 hospital room reserved for COVID-19 patients, to lessen the probability of collecting other airborne 112 human respiratory viruses. We thus collected aerosols containing SARS-CoV-2 in a room housing 113 COVID-19 patients using our VIVAS air samplers that collect virus particles without damaging them, thus conserving their viability. These samplers operate using a water-vapor condensation mechanism.^{27,28} 114 115 Air samplings were performed at the University of Florida Health (UF Health) Shands Hospital, which is 116 a 1,050-bed teaching hospital situated in Gainesville, Florida. As of 10 July 2020, > 200 patients have 117 been treated at the hospital for COVID-19. The current study was conducted as part of ongoing 118 environmental investigations by the UF Health infection control group to assess possible healthcare 119 worker exposure to SARS-CoV-2.

120

121 Methods

Detailed methods are provided in a Technical Appendix. An abbreviated summary of methods isprovided below:

124 Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and patients

The study protocol was approved by the UF IRB (study IRB202002102). Patient 1 was a person with coronary artery disease and other co-morbidities who had been transferred from a long-term care facility for COVID-19 treatment the evening before our air sampling tests were initiated; he had a positive NP swab test on admission that was positive for SARS-CoV-2 by RT-PCR. Patient 2 had been admitted four days before the air sampling tests with a mid-brain stroke; the patient had a positive NP swab test for

- 130 SARS-CoV-2 on admission, but a repeat test was negative, and the patient was in the process of being
- 131 discharged at the time the air sampling was being done.

132 Hospital room

- Air samples were collected in a room that was part of a designated COVID-19 ward (Figure 1). The room
- had six air changes per hour and the exhaust air underwent triple filter treatment (minimum efficiency
- reporting value [MERV] 14, 75%-85% efficiency for 0.3 µm particles), coil condensation (to remove
- 136 moisture), and UV-C irradiation prior to recycling 90% of the treated air back to the room.

137 Air samplers and sampling parameters

- 138 Three serial 3-hr air samplings were performed using our prototype VIVAS air sampler,^{23, 27, 28} as well as
- a BioSpot-VIVAS BSS300P, which is a commercial version of the VIVAS (available from Aerosol
- 140 Devices Inc., Ft. Collins, CO). These samplers collect airborne particles using a water-vapor
- 141 condensation method.^{23, 27, 28} Two samplers were used so that air could be collected/sampled at different
- sites of the same room during a given air sampling period. For each sampler, the second of the three
- samplings was performed with a high efficiency particulate arrestance (HEPA) filter affixed to the inlet
- tube, a process we implement to reveal whether virus detected in consecutive samplings reflect true
- 145 collection and not detection of residual virus within the collector. The air-samplers were stationed from 2
- to 4.8 m away from the patients (Figure 1).

147 Detection of SARS-CoV-2 genomic RNA (vRNA) in collection media

- vRNA was extracted from virions in collection media and purified by using a QIA amp Viral RNA Mini
- 149 Kit (Qiagen, Valencia, CA, USA). Twenty-five µL (final volume) real-time reverse-transcription
- polymerase chain reaction (rtRT-PCR) tests were performed in a BioRad CFX96 Touch Real-Time PCR
- 151 Detection System using 5 µL of purified vRNA and rtRT-PCR primers and the probe listed in Table 1
- 152 that detect a section of the SARS-CoV-2 N-gene.²³ The N-gene rRT-PCR assay that was used was part of
- a dual (N- and RdRp-gene) rRT-PCR assay designed by J. Lednicky and does not detect common human
- alpha- or beta-coronaviruses. Using this particular N-gene rRT-PCR detection system, the limit of
- detection is about 1.5 SARS-CoV-2 genome equivalents per 25 µL rRT-PCR assay.

156 Cell lines for virus isolation

- 157 Cell lines used for the isolation of SARS-CoV-2 were obtained from the American Type Culture
- 158 Collection (ATCC) and consisted of LLC-MK2 (Rhesus monkey kidney cells, catalog no. ATCC CCL-7)
- and Vero E6 cells (African green monkey kidney cells, catalog no. ATCC CRL-1586).

160 Isolation of virus in cultured cells

- 161 Cells grown as monolayers in a T-25 flask (growing surface 25 cm^2) were inoculated when they were at
- 162 80% of confluency. First, aliquots (100 µL) of the concentrated air sampler collection media were filtered
- through a sterile 0.45 μm pore-size PVDV syringe-tip filter to remove bacterial and fungal cells and
- spores. Next, the spent LLC-MK2 and Vero E6 cell culture medium was removed and replaced with 1 mL
- 165 of cell culture medium, and the cells inoculated with 50 µL of cell filtrate. When virus-induced cytopathic
- 166 effects (CPE) were evident, the presence of SARS-CoV-2 was determined by rRT-PCR.

167 Quantification of SARS-CoV-2 genomes in sampled air

- 168 The number of viral genome equivalents present in each sample was estimated from the measured
- 169 quantification cycle (Cq) values. To do so, a 6-log standard curve was run using 10-fold dilutions of a
- 170 calibrated plasmid containing an insert of the SARS-CoV-2 N-gene that had been obtained from IDT
- 171 Technologies, Inc. (Coralville, Iowa). The data was fit using equation (eq.) 1:
- 172 Eq. 1. y = (log10GE)(a) + b, where y = Cq value, a = slope of the regression line, log10GE is the base
- 173 10 log genome equivalents, and b is the intercept of the regression line.

174 Sanger sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 genomes in material collected by air samplers

- 175 To obtain the virus consensus sequence prior to possible changes that might occur during isolation of the
- 176 virus in cell cultures, a direct sequencing approach was used. Because the amount of virus present in the
- samples was low and thus unsuitable for common next-generation sequencing approaches, Sanger
- sequencing based on a gene-walking approach with over-lapping primers was used to obtain the virus
- 179 sequence.²³
- 180 Next-generation sequencing the genome of SARS-CoV-2 isolated from NP swab

181	The vRNA extracted from virions in spent Vero E6 cell culture medium served as a template to generate a
182	cDNA library using a NEBNext Ultra II RNA Library Prep kit (New England Biolabs, Inc.). Sequencing
183	was performed on an Illumina MiSeq sequencer using a 600-cycle v3 MiSeq Reagent kit. Following the
184	removal of host sequences (Chlorocebus sabaeus; GenBank assembly accession number
185	GCA_000409795.2) using Kraken 2, ²⁹ de novo assembly of paired-end reads was performed in SPAdes
186	v3.13.0 with default parameters. ³⁰
187	Results
188	SARS-CoV-2 genomic RNA (vRNA) was detected by real-time reverse transcriptase quantitative
189	polymerase chain reaction (rRT-qPCR) in material collected by air samplings 1-1, 1-3, 2-1, and 2-3,
190	which had been performed without a HEPA filter covering the inlet tube. In contrast, in the presence of a
191	HEPA filter, no SARS-CoV-2 genomes were detected in air samplings 1-2 and 2-2 (Table 1).
192	Virus-induced CPE were observed in LLC-MK2 and Vero E6 cells inoculated with material extruded
193	from the NP specimen of patient 1 and from liquid collection media from air samples 1-1, 1-3, 2-1, and 2-
194	3. Early CPE in both LLC-MK2 and Vero E6 cells consisted of the formation of cytoplasmic vacuoles
195	that were apparent within 2 days post-inoculation (dpi) of the cells with material extruded from the NP
196	swab and 4 to 6 dpi with aliquots of the liquid collection media from the air samplers. At later times (4
197	days onwards after inoculation of cell cultures with material from the NP swab, and 6 – 11 dpi of the cells
198	with material collected by air samplers), rounding of the cells occurred in foci, followed by detachment of
199	the cells from the growing surface. Some of the rounded cells detached in clumps, and occasional small
200	syncytia with 3 -5 nuclei were observed. Apoptotic and necrotic cells were also observed. A
201	representative collage showing the progressive development of CPE in Vero E6 cells inoculated with
202	material collected during air sampling 1-1 is shown in Figure 2. Cytopathic effects were not observed and
203	virus was not detected or isolated from the culture medium of samples 1-2 and 2-2, wherein HEPA filters
204	had been affixed to the inlet nozzles of the air samplers, and were not observed in mock-inoculated cells
205	which were maintained in parallel with the inoculated cell cultures.

SARS-CoV-2-specific rRT-PCR tests were performed and the results indicated that the LLC-MK2 and
Vero E6 cultures inoculated with collection media from air samplings 1-1, 1-3, 2-1, and 2-3 contained
SARS-CoV-2 (data not shown). No other respiratory virus was identified in the samples using a BioFire
FilmArray Respiratory 2 Panel (BioMérieux Inc., Durham, North Carolina), following the manufacturer's
instructions.

211 Whereas the concentration of SARS-CoV-2 genome equivalents per liter of air were estimated (Table 212 2), determination of the specific infectivity (ratio of SARS-CoV-2 genome equivalents present for every 213 one able to infect a cell in culture) required performance of a plaque assay or a standard 50% endpoint 214 dilution assay (TCID₅₀ assay). Plaque assays could not be performed due to a nationwide non-availability 215 of some critical media components (due to COVID-19 pandemic-related temporary lockdown of 216 production facilities), so TCID₅₀ assays were performed in Vero E6 cells to estimate the percentage of the 217 collected virus particles that were viable. Estimates ranged from 2 to 74 TCID₅₀ units/L of air (Table 3). 218 A nearly complete SARS-CoV-2 genome sequence was obtained by next-generation sequencing (NGS) 219 of RNA purified from cell culture medium of Vero E6 cells 7 dpi with NP swab material from patient 1. 220 The nearly complete genome sequence (and the virus isolate) were designated SARS-CoV-2/human/UF-221 19/2020, and this genome sequence has been deposited in GenBank (accession no. MT668716) and in 222 GISAID (accession no. EPI ISL 480349). Because the amount of virus RNA was below the threshold 223 that could be easily sequenced by our NGS methods, Sanger sequencing was used to sequence SARS-224 CoV-2 RNA purified from the collection media of air samplers 1-1, 1-3, 2-1, and 2-3. One complete 225 SARS-CoV-2 sequence was attained for RNA purified in the material collected by air sampling 1-1, and 226 three nearly complete sequences for 1-3, 2-1, and 2-3, respectively. After alignment, comparisons of the 227 three partial sequences with the complete sequence of SARS-CoV-2 in air sampling 1-1 indicated that the 228 same consensus genome sequence were present in the virions that had been collected in all the air 229 samplings. Moreover, they were an exact match with the corresponding sequences of the virus isolated 230 from patient 1. This complete genome sequence of the virus collected by the air samplers (and the virus 231 therein) were considered the same isolate and designated SARS-CoV-2/Environment/UF-20/2020, and

232	this genome sequence has been deposited in GenBank (accession no. MT670008) and in GISAID
233	(accession no. EPI_ISL_477163). The virus' genomic sequence currently falls within GISAID clade
234	B.1(GH), which is characterized by mutations C241T, C3037T, A23403G, G25563T, S-D614G, and
235	NS3-Q57H relative to reference genome WIV04 (GenBank accession no. MN996528.1). As of 10 July
236	2020, SARS-CoV-2 clade B.1(GH) was the predominant virus lineage in circulation in the USA.
237	
238	Discussion
239	There are substantial epidemiologic data supporting the concept that SARS-CoV, which is highly related
240	to SARS-CoV-2, ³ was transmitted via an aerosol route. ³¹⁻³³ For SARS-CoV-2, there have also been two
241	epidemiologic reports consistent with aerosol transmission. ^{15,34} However, despite these reports,
242	uncertainties remain about the relative importance of aerosol transmission of SARS-CoV-2, given that so
243	far, only one study has provided weak evidence of virus isolation from material collected by air
244	samplers. ²¹ In other reports, attempts to isolate the virus were not successful. The current study takes
245	advantage of a newer air sampling technology that operates using a water-vapor condensation mechanism,
246	facilitating the likelihood of isolating the virus in tissue culture.
247	As reported in air sampling tests performed by others ^{9-11,21} and in our previous report, ²³ airborne
248	SARS-CoV-2 was present in a location with COVID-19 patients. The distance from the air-samplers to
249	the patients (≥ 2 m) suggests that the virus was present in aerosols. Unlike previous studies, we have
250	demonstrated the virus in aerosols can be viable, and this suggests that there is an inhalation risk for
251	acquiring COVID-19 within the vicinity of people who emit the virus through expirations including
252	coughs, sneezes, and speaking.
253	The amount of airborne virus detected per liter of air was small, and future studies should address (a)
254	whether this is typical for COVID-19, (b) if this represented virus production relative to the phase of

255 infection in the patient, (c) if this was a consequence of active air flow related to air exchanges within the

room, (d) or if the low number of virus was due to technical difficulties in removing small airborne
 particles from the air.²⁶

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258	Our findings reveal that viable SARS-CoV-2 can be present in aerosols generated by a COVID-19
259	patient in a hospital room in the absence of an aerosol-generating procedure, and can thus serve as a
260	source for transmission of the virus in this setting. Moreover, the public health implications are broad,
261	especially as current best practices for limiting the spread of COVID-19 center on social distancing,
262	wearing of face-coverings while in proximity to others and hand-washing. For aerosol-based
263	transmission, measures such as physical distancing by 6 feet would not be helpful in an indoor setting,
264	provide a false-sense of security and lead to exposures and outbreaks. With the current surges of cases, to
265	help stem the COVID-19 pandemic, clear guidance on control measures against SARS-CoV-2 aerosols
266	are needed, as recently voiced by other scientists. ³⁵
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268 269	Contributors
	Contributors JAL, ML, ZHF, AJ, AEF, KC, JGM Jr, and C-YW conceived and designed the study. JAL, ML, KC, JG
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279 Declaration of interests

280 The authors proclaim they have no conflicts of interest to report.

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384 Tables

			-i ek printers and probe.				
	Primer/probe name	Description	Oligonucleotide sequence (5' to 3')	Label			
Led-N-F		SARS CoV-2 N Forward Primer	5'-GGGAGCAGAGGCGGCAGTCAAG-3'	None			
	Led-N-R	SARS CoV-2 N Reverse Primer	5'-CATCACCGCCATTGCCAGCCATTC-3'	None			
	Led-N-Probe ^a	SARS CoV-2 N Probe	5' FAM-CCTCATCACGTAGTCGCAACAGTTC- BHQ1-3'	FAM, BHQ1			
385	^a This TaqMan®	probe is 5'-end lat	beled with the reporter molecule 6-carboxyfluorescein (FAN	I) and with			
386	quencher Black Hole Quencher 1 (BHQ-1) at the 3'- end.						
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Table 1. SARS-CoV-2 N-gene rRT-PCR primers and probe.

Sample ID	Approx. distance (m) from head of patient 1 ^b	Approx. distance (m) from head of patient 2 ^b	rRT- qPCR test	Cq value	SARS-CoV-2 genome equivalents/25 µL rtRT-PCR test	SARS-CoV-2 genome equivalents/L of air
1-1 BioSpot	2	4.6	+	36.02	2.82E+03	94
1-2 BioSpot + HEPA	2	4.6	-	-	-	-
1-3 BioSpot	2	$0 (PD^b)$	+	37.69	9.12E+02	30
2-1 VIVAS	4.8	3	+	37.42	1.15E+03	44
2-2 VIVAS+ HEPA	4.8	3	-	-	-	-
2-3 VIVAS	4.8	$0 (PD^d)$	+	38.69	4.68E+02	16
SARS-CoV-2 vRNA	N/A ^c	N/A	+	29.53	2.20E+05	N/A
N-gene ^a DNA control - 1	N/A	N/A	+	26.56	1.00E+06	N/A
N-gene DNA control - 2	N/A	N/A	+	31.21	1.00E+05	N/A
N-gene DNA control - 3	N/A	N/A	+	34.71	1.00E+04	N/A
N-gene DNA control -4	N/A	N/A	+	37.74	1.00E+03	N/A
N-gene DNA control - 5	N/A	N/A	+	40.41	1.00E+02	N/A
N-gene DNA control - 6	N/A	N/A	+	-	1.00E+01	N/A
Known positive (NP swab ^e)	N/A	N/A	+	24.12	8.36E+06	N/A
Negative (no RNA) control	N/A	N/A	N/A	-	0	N/A

405 Table 2. Results of rRT-qPCR tests of materials collected by air samplers.

406 ^aN-gene, N-gene plasmid (positive control template).

407 ^bDistance from sampler inlet nozzle to patient's head.

- 408 ^cN/A, Not applicable.
- 409 ^dPD, patient discharged.
- 410 ^eNP, Nasal-pharyngeal swab from a person screened for SARS-CoV-2 at the UF EPI High-Throughput
- 411 COVID-19 Research Testing Facility.
- 412
- 413 Table 3. Estimate of viable virus counts based on TCID₅₀ tests.

Sample ID	Virus genome equivalents/L of air ^a	TCID ₅₀ /100 μl	Viable virus count/L air
1-1 BioSpot	94	2.68E+04	74
1-2 BioSpot + HEPA	-	0	0
1-3 BioSpot	30	6.31E+03	18
2-1 VIVAS	44	1.00E+04	27
2-2 VIVA S+ HEPA	-	0	0
2-3 VIVAS	16	2.15E+03	6

414 ^aFrom Table 2.

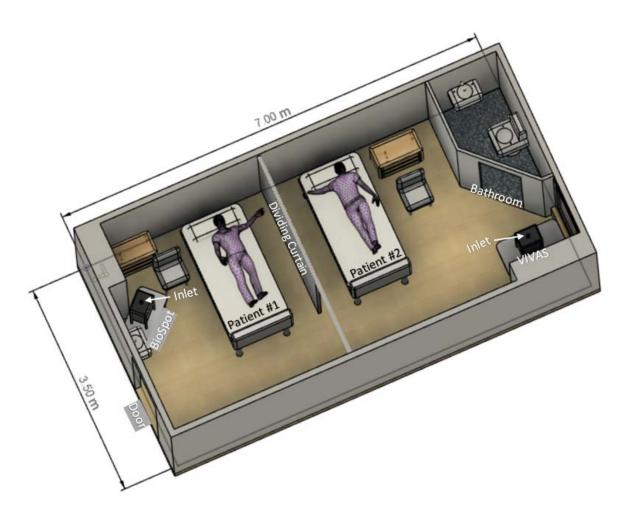
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417 Figure legends

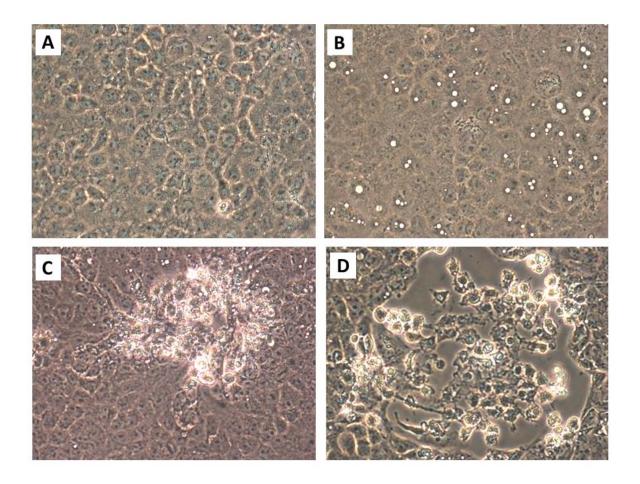
418 Figure 1. Schematic diagram of room with depiction of patient bed and air-sampler locations.

- 420 Figure 2. Cytopathic effects in Vero E6 cells inoculated with material collected from the air during air
- 421 sampling 1-1. [A] Mock-infected Vero E6 cells, 10 days post-inoculation with sterile collection medium.
- 422 [B]. Large cytoplasmic vacuoles in Vero E6 cells inoculated with collection medium from BioSpot
- 423 sample 1-1 at 4 dpi. [C] Early focus of infection 7 dpi. [D] Focus of infection 10 dpi. Rounded cells that
- 424 are detaching, some in clumps, are present. Attached cells remaining in this focus of infection have dark
- 425 cytoplasms, some have large cytoplasmic inclusion bodies, and some cells are elongated. Original
- 426 magnifications at 400X.

443 Figure 1.



454 Figure 2.



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