

CORRESPONDENCE

Questioning the timeline of H1N1 flu vaccination contracts

We take issue with points made in your News story (*Nature* **465**, 672–673; 2010) about our investigation into how the World Health Organization (WHO) handled conflicts of interest with the drug industry in planning for the H1N1 'swine' flu pandemic (D. Cohen and P. Carter *Br. Med. J.* **340**, c2912; 2010).

You confuse the findings of our separate investigation with a report published on the same day by the Council of Europe.

You also claim it is untrue that vaccine contracts were triggered by declaration of the pandemic on 11 June 2009, and that some countries had already placed large orders for H1N1 vaccine and so could not have been influenced by the WHO Emergency Committee. In fact, the committee met three times before the pandemic was declared, and twice before the signing of the US contract you cite as conclusive evidence of our error.

The first meeting took place on 25 April 2009. The next day, the United States announced a public-health emergency and the creation of seed stock for an H1N1 vaccine (see go.nature.com/38QyBj).

The fact that some countries pre-empted the 11 June declaration by ordering vaccine is immaterial. On 14 May 2009, Alan Johnson, then UK health secretary, announced: "We have advance purchase agreements with manufacturers that will be activated if the World Health Organization moves to phase 6 — that is, if it declares a pandemic. We are still at phase 5 at the moment. However, we have always known that it might take four to six months before a matching vaccine becomes available, and more than a year before it can be manufactured in sufficient quantities for the entire population, given that international demand will be high."

(For a more detailed response to your News story, see

go.nature.com/agFB1b).

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Editorial note: Nature stands by the facts in the News article; see update at go.nature.com/CdaLJm.

Gender agenda: positive steps taken in Germany

Professional scientific associations are in a strong position to ensure that gender is included in the human-research agenda (*Nature* **465**, 665 and 688–690; 2010).

For example, the German Society of Epidemiology (DGEpi) has included gender considerations in its guidelines for more than ten years. It demands justification for any study that focuses on one sex if the results could potentially affect both sexes.

Gender will be taken into account in an important new German cohort study of multifactorial chronic diseases, including diabetes, cancer and dementia; this will follow 200,000 healthy participants recruited over the period 2012–16 (see go.nature.com/ah1Uew). Decision-making bodies associated with the study will have to ensure that female researchers are also appropriately represented. Another, nationally funded, initiative supports the integration of gender factors in all new research projects in medicine and epidemiology (see go.nature.com/nv2Fvo).

Germany's main epidemiology and public-health associations are endorsing both projects.

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Assessing effects of afforestation projects in China

In their Correspondence, Cao *et al.* suggest that afforestation projects in drylands could be exacerbating environmental degradation (*Nature* **465**, 31; 2010). However, afforestation in China does not only involve tree planting: planting shrubs for environmental protection is one of the many afforestation activities defined by the Forest Law of the People's Republic of China (see go.nature.com/pgZqRY). Environmental changes resulting from tree planting in specific regions cannot be extrapolated to entire afforestation projects.

Most water from atmospheric precipitation cannot be effectively conserved *in situ* even if it is not partially consumed by natural or artificial vegetation. Serious soil erosion and environmental disasters, such as floods caused by run-off, are key environmental degradation problems in drylands, especially in the Loess Plateau in northwestern China. Scientists and policy-makers need to recognize the inherent complexities of dryland ecosystems so that the effects of the indisputable trade-off between soil-erosion control and water conservation can be minimized.

The low resilience of dryland ecosystems means that natural restoration is extremely difficult. Afforestation is one way to reconstruct almost natural dryland ecosystems. We do not deny that some afforestation efforts have had suboptimal results, caused by the use of unsuitable tree species, or inappropriate initial densities or afforestation methods. Also, some official reports or data from case studies have overestimated or exaggerated the environmental effectiveness of afforestation activities in drylands. However, forest ecology projects have undoubtedly contributed to environmental improvement and have therefore been promoted for

the sustainable development of drylands in China.

A more scientific and feasible assessment system of these projects should be established to provide more accurate information for the public.

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Cao and colleagues reply:

As Yang *et al.* point out, we focused on tree planting in China in our Correspondence; however, planting the wrong species of shrub can also cause depletion of soil water and exacerbate environmental degradation (X. M. Mu *et al. Acta Pedologica Sinica* **40**, 210–217; 2003).

We disagree that the main factor responsible for soil erosion in drylands is run-off: serious soil erosion and related environmental disasters, such as desertification and sandstorms, are caused by wind — particularly where annual precipitation is less than 400 millimetres (X. M. Wang *et al. Earth-Sci. Rev.* **88**, 188–206; 2008). Wind erosion can increase in grassland that has been invaded by shrubs or trees because the protective covering of grasses is damaged.

Smaller trade-offs and better compromises between soil and water conservation can be achieved when environmental restoration relies on species that do not use more water than is available. A reliance on afforestation is not the solution, even when the definition of afforestation is expanded to include the planting of shrubs. The solution is to identify the most appropriate vegetation.

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