Correspondence

Curb spread of virus emerging in China

I applaud Chinese colleagues' prompt release of the genome sequence of the virus responsible for the mystery respiratory illness in Wuhan in central China (see *Nature* http://doi.org/djhc; 2020). The agent is a previously unknown type of coronavirus that is distantly related to the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) coronavirus. To curb the spread of the virus, its animal reservoir must be quickly identified and human-to-human transmission thoroughly investigated (see also go.nature.com/2ua489i).

The authorities have been understandably cautious after the early misidentification of the SARS pathogen in 2003. However, the results of animal testing from a seafood market in Wuhan, where the virus was initially isolated, must be released as soon as possible. The virology community also feels that human-to-human transmission should not be ruled out without compelling evidence.

This information is particularly crucial because tens of millions of people will be travelling — and consuming potentially contaminated animal meat — to celebrate the Chinese New Year on 25 January. The public needs clear instructions and guidance.

Controlling the spread of emerging and re-emerging viruses calls for international efforts. China's research collaborations and data-sharing must continue — including with the United States, despite other problems with their relations.

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Grants: don't leave it to luck

I was shocked to read that a growing number of funding bodies are assigning research grants randomly (*Nature* **575**, 574–575; 2019). As an early-career researcher, I might be expected to gain from such a system, given that I could land a windfall without having my case judged against the competition. But I want my career to be built on achievement, as recognized and promoted through conventional grant awards — not undermined by a lottery system.

Some researchers might see random funding as more time-efficient, because it dispenses with the review process. It spares reviewers the burden of differentiating between the lowest-ranked successful candidate and the highest-ranked candidate who didn't make the cut. However, for a researcher just starting out, a positive review based on the applicant's contributions to the literature and other scientific merits is crucial for advancement.

And if lottery-based grants become widespread, academic research will suffer as fruitful ideas are arbitrarily stalled. Leaving success up to lady luck is not a solution.

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Grants: lottery is laziness

The idea of a funding lottery (*Nature* **575**, 574–575; 2019) is, in my view, a classic bureaucratic response to a process that bureaucracy finds too hard to handle.

The review of scientific grant applications depends on an assessment of their quality, requiring a strict combination of evidence and intellectual judgement. Stuff that, say the bureaucrats. "Let's make it a lottery, and save ourselves time and money." Sure, some applications might flourish that otherwise would not, but what about the high-quality research that has been carefully constructed over time and is suddenly de-funded? Such a funding system is, in effect, anti-intellectual. It is a research version of publication bibliometrics that focus merely on citation counts, not on quality.

Academia must resist this bureaucratization of research and publishing by well-meaning but scientifically inept bureaucrats. Otherwise, science itself stands to be plunged into the same miasma of metrics and bureaucracy-benefiting processes that have already weakened other great institutions, many examples of which are described in Jerry Muller's book *The Tyranny of Metrics* (see *Nature* **554**, 167; 2018).

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Climate change: be mindful at meetings

Scientists are keen to lower the toll their work takes on the planet (see, for example, O. Hamant *et al. Nature* **573**, 451–452; 2019). At a recent Harvard conference on sociology and climate change, Hannah Holleman — a sociologist at Amherst College in Massachusetts — offered us a gentle reminder of how our research is embedded in everyday practices (see go.nature.com/3acmulr).

In her memorable opening statement, Holleman drew attention to the debt we owe to the native peoples whose traditional homelands are now occupied by the university, the natural resources used to build the venue, the production of sustenance for the event, and the fossil fuel needed for us to convene. She pointed out that the organic materials used would return, as waste, to the land.

This unusual opening to an academic discussion landed a strong emotional punch. It was a powerful reminder — even for scholars who are well informed and deeply committed to solving the biodiversity and climate crises — of our shared responsibility and accountability. It used mindfulness as a way to amplify the urgency of that message. This approach could bear further exploration at other meetings on climate change.

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