

Correspondence

Outpace epidemic transitional phases

An analysis of the causes of forthcoming epidemics in the twenty-first century has been validated by the COVID-19 pandemic (J. Bedford *et al.* *Nature* 575, 130–136; 2019). The International Initiative on Spatial Lifecourse Epidemiology (ISLE), which we direct, is a transdisciplinary collaborative network that is helping to keep up with the dynamic and multidimensional nature of epidemics (P. Jia *Lancet Planet. Health* 3, PE57–E59; 2019). It aims to improve the forecasting, monitoring and management of chronic diseases and epidemics.

The ISLE uses big data, citizen science, artificial intelligence and advanced tracking technologies to investigate the long-term effects of environmental, behavioural, psychosocial and biological factors on public health. This year, it relocated from Europe to China to strengthen leadership and public-health measures in developing regions, particularly for epidemic control and prevention. It adopts ‘one-health’ approaches – using Earth-observation technologies to monitor the environment, ecology and health, for example. Also, the community is encouraged to participate in research into the aetiology, prevention and treatment of past diseases as a guide to future responses.

We urge the World Health Organization to coordinate the geographical coverage of global public-health initiatives and to promote their relocation to the most vulnerable regions.

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Coronavirus: a veterinary view

As a researcher in viral diseases who has worked for ten years with feline coronavirus, I question the contention arising from a study of cats’ susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 that surveillance of the disease in cats should be considered as “an adjunct to elimination of COVID-19 in humans” (J. Shi *et al.* Preprint at bioRxiv <http://doi.org/drwbw>; 2020). As you note, the study was not peer reviewed and there were limitations in its experimental design (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/ggq7wp>; 2020). The authors’ claim has sparked grave concerns in the veterinary community that it could lead to the unnecessary persecution of cats.

Moreover, the authors mention that nasal swabbing – normally a simple procedure – was impossible because of the cats’ “aggressive” behaviour. In my view, this indicates a disregard for basic animal welfare. This should not be side-stepped in the haste to generate insight into the COVID-19 pandemic.

Researchers also have a responsibility not to prematurely release contentious results that have far-reaching implications. Brazil, for example, has 22 million cats, among the largest populations in the world, and their mass abandonment would be catastrophic. This responsibility is paramount during a deadly pandemic, when even the flimsiest information can be seized on, amplified and distorted on social media.

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Social media fuelling Amazon destruction

The same technological tools that spread misinformation and influence elections are now taking aim at our natural world. Misinformation campaigns on social media are particularly rampant and troubling in Brazil.

In the past year, backers of Jair Bolsonaro’s government burnt vast tracts of the Amazon rainforest to support large-scale agribusiness, further accelerating the current rate of Amazonian deforestation (see go.nature.com/341rxda). These environmental atrocities are being denied on social media, despite evidence from Brazil’s own National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Bolsonaro seeks to end fines for environmental crimes. He has accused scientists of falsifying data (see go.nature.com/341bj4e; in Portuguese) and, last August, he dismissed INPE director Ricardo Galvão – listed in *Nature* as one of the ten most important scientists of 2019 (*Nature* 576, 361–372; 2019). He is also demeaning and demoralizing Amazonian Indians, who have inhabited these forests for millennia, in his Facebook broadcasts – probably, in our view, to justify the exploitation and environmental degradation.

Moreover, the flames of last summer’s fires in the Amazon were fanned on social media: individual actions were coordinated and amplified to inflict irreversible damage on this unique ecosystem. We call for a renewed commitment to trustworthy information and to those who fight for the rights of all living beings.

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Long battle against eugenics legacy

We wish to correct Angela Saini’s misleading claim that University College London’s geneticists were “willing to overlook” their department’s links with the Galton Laboratory, founded for research into eugenics in 1904 (*Nature* 579, 175; 2020). This undermines several decades of determined effort by us and our predecessors to confront the laboratory’s troubling history.

Over the years, this engagement has informed ethical debates relevant to our research. It has guided the development of genetic-counselling protocols and the debunking of the foundations of eugenics, as well as the related issue of ‘race’ as a biological concept. We have taught this pernicious history to tens of thousands of students who have taken our various courses.

Members of our department have written and spoken openly and critically to the media and the public on the subject. The report produced by the university’s eugenics inquiry failed to acknowledge this properly, which is one of several reasons why the majority of the inquiry committee refused to sign it.

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