Correspondence

NIH reviewers on sex-inclusion policy

Since 2016, the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has required those it funds to consider sex as a biological variable in their experimental design, analyses and reporting of preclinical studies: in other words, they should include female animals equitably, where necessary for rigour. To explore how the policy has been working, we surveyed the scientists who review NIH grant applications — called study-section members — in September 2016 and October 2017. In their responses, we found cause for both commendation and concern.

These reviewers report that an increasing number of investigators are incorporating the policy into their submissions (for details, see N. C. Woitowich and T. K. Woodruff *J. Womens Health* **28**, 9–16; 2019). In 2017, 68% thought that considering sex as a biological variable is important for NIH-funded research, and 58% thought that implementing the policy would improve the rigour and reproducibility of biomedical research. Although study-section members are a subset of all biomedical scientists, their views are an important proxy for the promise of this policy for improving scientific discovery and outcomes.

The quantitative data were positive overall, but female study-section members in the 2017 cohort (the minority) were significantly more likely than men to view the sex-inclusion policy as favourable.

Open-ended comments revealed variability in how policy adherence was judged to affect grant scoring. Some did not consider the policy to be a score-driving factor. Others differed on how it relates to costs and to the overuse of experimental animals. Federal and local dialogue and education should address those concerns.

The swift uptake of the sex-inclusion policy contrasts with the slow progress on the inclusion of women and minorities in NIH-funded clinical research, as stipulated in the 1993 NIH Revitalization Act (S. E. Geller *et al. Acad. Med.* **93**, 630–635; 2018).

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Help islands cope with climate change

Small-island developing states are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. They are fighting rising sea levels and temperatures. To help these states, many of which are members of the commonwealth, the Association of Commonwealth Universities launched the Commonwealth Climate Resilience Network last year. The network's institutions collaborate on mutually beneficial research projects and share best practices for preventing and responding to natural disasters.

These institutions include the University of the West Indies, the University of the South Pacific and Fiji National University. Their research and development draws from information on weather modelling, for example, and guidance on matters such as agricultural technology and big-data collection and analysis. As hubs with local, national and international roles and connections, universities are also crucial for a community's economy in the aftermath of natural disasters.

There are important local initiatives with support from international grants and scholarships. One is the Quake Centre, established in partnership with New Zealand's government and the University of Canterbury as well as several of its industry groups. Another is India's Tata Institute of Social Sciences, which is working with the Kerala government on a long-term institutional response to flooding by using digital systems.

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Gene drives: equity demands civility

At the 14th Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity late last year, I witnessed the rapid deterioration of a crucial discussion. It was on the potential of synthetic biology in environmental conservation. What started as heckling turned into a yelling match of misinformation. Such disruptive behaviour robbed the global community of a rare opportunity to debate gene drives in a meaningful way. Sidelined young scientists, country delegates and others watched in disbelief.

This dangerous breakdown in civil dialogue stems from the potential risks posed by gene-drive technology. In theory, gene drives could restore threatened ecosystems and eliminate vectors of disease. But they could also transform entire species by pushing edited genes through populations of wild plants and animals.

Broad, thoughtful and respectful debate is therefore the only way to abolish scientific and societal blind spots, minimize risks and steer the safe and equitable sharing of any benefits of gene-drive technology. Gene drives are likely to affect environments bound by kinship, cultural identity and life-sustaining resources. It is not enough for the communities in those environments, including historically marginalized peoples, simply to be present at the debating table — their voices must be heard.

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Rwanda takes up science-policy baton

Rwanda is now one of the growing number of developing countries that are encouraging scientists to help shape evidence-based government policy (see also *Nature* **560**, 671–673; 2018). Such efforts (see, for example, go.nature.com/2eae4kpn) have boosted health gains in the past couple of decades. World Bank data show that life expectancy in Rwanda rose from 29 to 68 years between 1994 and 2015, and mortality during childbirth fell by 70% over the same period.

The Rwanda Biomedical Center in Kigali City, for instance, works in partnership with researchers across the world in the Demand-Driven Evaluations for Decisions programme to analyse service statistics from Health Management Information Systems and to answer policymakers' research questions. Data collected from different districts can be used to assess the impact of expanding community-based malaria treatment during times of resurgence, for example. Health professionals can then use the outcomes of policy interventions that are based on such evidence to improve local clinical practice.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

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