Correspondence

Equality drives can silence women

Gender-equality initiatives in academia can have unintended drawbacks (see C. Tzanakou *Nature* **570**, 277; 2019). Counter-intuitively, they can result in the serious under-reporting of sexual harassment in academia, according to the 2019 European Gender Summit at which I chaired a session (see gender-summit.com).

Universities recruiting women academics through gender-equality initiatives search for top-tier talent. Those that receive extra funding for such initiatives do not necessarily look kindly on staff who speak out about harassment or unequal treatment. There are reports of leaders exposing whistle-blowers to retaliation tactics such as intimidation, exclusion and silencing (D. Fernando and A. Prasad *Hum. Relat.* **72**, 1565–1594; 2019).

The research output of whistle-blowers can plunge under such harrowing circumstances. They lose trust in the institutions they worked so hard to become a part of. Moreover, witnesses to such retaliatory practices become reluctant to report harassment.

Universities must embrace complaints if they are to achieve diversity and inclusivity. Otherwise, recruiting top women academics through gender-equality initiatives could become an unintentional search-and-destroy mission.

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China's shades of greening

Your view that China's re-vegetation of its deserts could exacerbate water shortages risks oversimplifying an incredibly complex eco-restoration problem (*Nature* **573**, 474–475; 2019).

Far from just planting trees in arid areas, China's re-vegetation codes vary for different regions and greening programmes. The nationwide Grain-to-Green programme, for example, aims to restore unstable and low-productivity farmlands to forest or natural vegetation. In humid areas, research optimizes greening programmes for plant selection and socio-economic benefits. And China's re-vegetation projects are confined to a range that local water resources can sustain.

Re-vegetation, like any eco-restoration strategy, is not a catch-all solution to carbon sequestration, soil erosion and flooding. But, rather than worrying mainly about water consumption, Chinese and other scientists are investigating the nexus of vegetation, soil, water, ecosystems and human society.

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Earthquakes: heed shocks and patterns

Being able to distinguish foreshocks and aftershocks of earthquakes in real time could be useful for earthquake prediction (see L. Gulia and S. Wiemer *Nature* **574**, 193–199; 2019). For example, the authors claim that — in retrospect — their method could have predicted the biggest such event in the 2016–17 cluster of earthquakes that occurred in the Apennines in central Italy: the magnitude-6.6 earthquake that hit the town of Norcia in October 2016. There were no casualties, yet the death toll from a similar event in the region — the Avezzano earthquake of magnitude 6.7 in January 1915 — was 30,000.

How could this difference be explained? It could be because Italy's Major Risk Committee, of which we were members at the time, found that a large event had a higher probability of occurring than usual, based on the persistence of the earthquake sequence in the region, and recommended putting the entire area under official alert. The committee issued a warning 40 hours ahead of the earthquake to the public, the press and the Civil Protection organization (see go.nature.com/2ecmvwk). As a result, prefects and mayors enforced mass evacuation.

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Testosterone's role in ovulation

As authors of the book reviewed by Randi Epstein (*Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography*, *Nature* **574**, 474–476; 2019), we wish to clarify two issues.

The first concerns Epstein's assertion that testosterone and its precursor, DHEA, have a role in the maturation of ovarian cells. She suggests that "DHEA might boost fertility directly or as a mediator of oestrogen production". But our reading of the evidence indicates that DHEA's positive effect on fertility is not because it mediates oestrogen production but because it is converted to testosterone. In our book, we describe studies in animal models showing that blocking the conversion of DHEA to oestrogen doesn't reduce DHEA's effects, whereas knocking out androgen receptors creates major fertility problems in females, including premature ovarian failure.

The second issue concerns Epstein's implication that our case for testosterone's role in ovulation rests on interviews with a single clinician. In fact, our conclusions are based on more than a dozen studies in non-human animals, and on a comprehensive analysis of original research and review articles on the use of DHEA or other androgens to boost the response to fertility treatment in women. The interview with the clinician simply served as a 'hook' for the story.

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