

Correspondence

COVID-19: Panama stockpiles unproven drugs

Panama has gone one step further than other Latin American countries that use the unproven drug ivermectin against COVID-19 (see *Nature* 586, 481–482; 2020). The government has approved this drug and hydroxychloroquine – despite the lack of efficacy data for either – and is stockpiling both. We find this alarming because the drugs' side effects could be toxic in a significant proportion of the population.

In March 2020, hydroxychloroquine was prescribed only to people with COVID-19 who were taking part in a clinical-trial protocol. Panama's ministry of health followed the advice of its Scientific Advisory Committee and two months later suspended the trial on the basis of growing evidence of the drug's ineffectiveness (see M. R. Mehra *et al. Lancet* 395, 1820; 2020). The World Health Organization subsequently declared that, according to the available data, hydroxychloroquine does not reduce fatality in people hospitalized with COVID-19, nor does it ameliorate symptoms of mild or moderate illness.

Despite these developments, Panama has since purchased 2,900,000 doses of hydroxychloroquine and 450,000 doses of ivermectin, to be distributed as part of a self-treatment kit to people self-isolating with the virus.

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Explain ESA's late ditching of new space telescope

The European Space Agency (ESA) has cancelled its proposed Space Infrared Telescope for Cosmology and Astrophysics (SPICA; go.nature.com/2jfp8fw) just months before the final mission-selection review. The decision – made by the executive on the grounds of undisclosed costs, not by the Science Programme Committee on the basis of peer review – has left many in the astronomy community with no confidence in the decision-making processes at the agency's highest levels (see public letter to ESA's director of science signed by almost 300 scientists, at <https://spicarebelalliance.com>).

ESA member states and collaborating countries have invested heavily in developing SPICA and expected a fair, transparent process for all competing projects. This cancellation was imposed without negotiation or communication with the SPICA team, and no details were given about the underlying costings. Why these suddenly became a problem after the completion of several comprehensive reviews is a mystery. The project team was given no opportunity to find a solution.

Without transparency and accountability in the making of such decisions, nothing will prevent other ESA projects from experiencing a similar fate.

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COVID-19: students caught in Pakistan's digital divide

Education in developing countries with patchy Internet coverage is particularly hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic (see *Nature* 585, 482; 2020), compromising the future of students unable to access online teaching. A United Nations' resolution emphasizes access to the Internet as a means of bridging the digital divide and facilitating the fundamental human right to education (see go.nature.com/2kcjp1p). In Pakistan, for example, nationwide Internet availability must be accelerated if the country's potential is not to be irreversibly compromised.

Take the remote mountainous Gilgit-Baltistan region, which has a record of high literacy. This will plummet without proper Internet connectivity because local schools can no longer teach. University students returning home in lockdown cannot access their institutional online classes.

In December 2019, the government started the Digital Pakistan initiative (DPI) to prioritize “access and connectivity”. After a year, an unacceptable proportion of the population is still without electricity, let alone broadband. A further blow to Pakistan's education and research has been dealt by the government's continual axing of the country's Higher Education Commission (HEC) budget.

As a researcher from Pakistan, I urge the government and the leadership of the DPI and the HEC to speed up plans to rectify this digital divide so that education can flourish again (see also *Nature* 582, 162–164; 2020).

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Giant tortoises make a comeback in Madagascar

Just two years after their reintroduction as part of a bold conservation strategy, giant tortoises (*Aldabrachelys gigantea*) have hatched in the wild in Madagascar for the first time in around 600 years. This milestone in rewilding could provide insight into the structure and dynamics of Madagascar's unique ecosystems, which were shaped by megafauna extirpated centuries ago. For us, some of the conservation biologists involved, it feels like a time-travel bonanza.

Overexploited and driven to extinction in Madagascar after humans arrived on the island 1,500 years or so ago (see B. E. Crowley *Quat. Sci. Rev.* 29, 2591–2603; 2010), giant tortoises survived because they colonized remote islands in the Seychelles. With the support of the Madagascan government, 12 were released in 2018 into a secure nature reserve. Two hatchlings appeared there in 2019, followed by another 25 in October this year. Now in a nursery, these juveniles will be returned to the wild once their carapaces can protect them from predators.

This type of innovative approach could help stop the catastrophic decline in the island's biodiversity, particularly in a changing climate (see also B. B. N. Strassburg *et al. Nature* 586, 724–729; 2020).

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