

News in brief



SCIENTISTS BACK FUKUSHIMA WASTEWATER RELEASE

Japan's proposal to discharge more than one million tonnes of contaminated water from the ruined Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station into the ocean has been strongly opposed by neighbours including China and South Korea. But scientists say the risks are likely to be minimal.

Japan revealed the proposal in April, prompting South Korea's foreign minister to express "strong regret and serious concerns". According to China's state news agency Xinhua, Chinese scientists also objected, with Liu Senlin at the China Institute of Atomic Energy in Beijing describing it as "extremely irresponsible".

But other scientists, and the International Atomic Energy Agency, say the radiation in the treated water will be very low, and the release will be gradual. "The facts are not telling me that this is something that we should be very worried about," says Jordi Vives I Batlle, a scientist at the Belgian Nuclear Research Centre in Mol.

The earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in 2011 led to the failure of cooling systems. In the past decade, 1.25 million tonnes of seawater have been pumped through the units to stop the molten fuel debris from overheating. The water has been treated to remove radioactive material and stored in more than 1,000 steel tanks on site.

COVID-19 TREATMENT TRIAL WILL NOW FOCUS ON IMMUNITY

A landmark programme to test potential COVID-19 therapies in dozens of countries is restarting, with a fresh roster of treatments. This time, the treatments aim to temper the immune responses that can worsen severe disease, an approach that has already shown promise in people hospitalized with COVID-19.

The clinical trial, named Solidarity and coordinated by the World Health Organization, will test three existing drugs. The first is infliximab, used to treat autoimmune conditions, including Crohn's disease and rheumatoid arthritis. A second is a cancer drug called imatinib, which researchers hope will target both the coronavirus and inflammation. The third is artesunate, an anti-malaria drug with potential anti-inflammatory effects. All three drugs were chosen because of the promise they showed in smaller clinical trials and their widespread availability, says John-Arne Røttingen, the chair of Solidarity's steering committee.

The trial's original run, which began in March 2020, tested four antiviral treatments (remdesivir, interferon, the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, and a combination of HIV drugs). None of them was found to save lives or shorten hospital stays.



MAJOR INVESTIGATION REVEALS HOW THE WORLD FAILED TO CURB COVID

The World Health Organization (WHO) was too cautious in communicating the risks of COVID-19 early last year, according to the first major investigation of the global pandemic response. Had it been bolder, and had nations heeded its guidance, the pandemic might have been curtailed, say the authors of the report.

Last year, at the annual World Health Assembly, countries demanded that the WHO initiate an independent review of how the crisis unfolded, so it could draw lessons for the future. The resulting report, released on 12 May, was assembled by a panel of 13 global-health experts independent of the WHO.

The lengthy investigation identifies February 2020 as the month when the devastating toll of the pandemic might have been lessened, had countries acted fast. It goes on to list concrete actions that could help to prevent a similar fate should another pathogen with pandemic potential emerge.

Some researchers say that the panel's suggestions for how to strengthen the WHO are too vague. But the panel does make a few ambitious recommendations, including creating a council of world

leaders dedicated to fighting pandemics, says Stephen Morrison, director of global health policy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington DC.

A handful of Asian countries made moves in February last year to curb COVID-19, including instituting testing for SARS-CoV-2. "But the rest of the world sat on their hands," says panel member Joanne Liu, a health-emergency specialist at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. She and her colleagues assessed how the WHO communicated risk, and decided that its cautious weighing of incomplete evidence might help to account for why countries failed to take action.

"When it became obvious that the countries that were wearing masks were faring better than the ones that weren't," she says, "the WHO might have said that even though we don't have all of the data, we should apply the precautionary principle," and recommend masks.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus announced that he would review the investigation's critiques and proposals, and would discuss reforms with all countries comprising the WHO.