

# Correspondence

## HFEA responds on germline therapy

As chief executive of the UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), I take issue with Marcy Darnovsky's criticisms of our public consultation on mitochondria replacement in reproductive therapy (*Nature* **499**, 127; 2013).

Darnovsky queries the statistic used by the HFEA: "one in 200 children is born each year with a form of mitochondrial disease." This comes from a study of mitochondrial mutations in the general population (H. R. Elliot *et al. Am. J. Hum. Genet.* **83**, 254–260; 2008) and includes children with mild or no symptoms. Other UK organizations use the same figure, notably the National Health Service (see [go.nature.com/dccm2](http://go.nature.com/dccm2)) and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics (see [go.nature.com/s6z8gk](http://go.nature.com/s6z8gk)).

Darnovsky also questions parts of the HFEA's methodology and conclusions. The consultation was designed with external experts, and enabled public participation in various 'strands' that used qualitative and quantitative analysis. Our aim was to go beyond 'yes' or 'no' responses. In all but one of five strands, most people supported mitochondria-replacement techniques. Our publicly open questionnaire drew more opposition from its self-selected respondents, with some arguing that any *in vitro* manipulation of embryos is inappropriate or unethical.

All the consultation material is available at our website ([www.hfea.gov.uk/7784.html](http://www.hfea.gov.uk/7784.html)). I suggest that people judge for themselves. **Peter Thompson HFEA, London.** [peter.thompson@hfea.gov.uk](mailto:peter.thompson@hfea.gov.uk)

## Ireland's research output set to slide

In the first global Nature Publishing Index (see [go.nature.com/vbqdb](http://go.nature.com/vbqdb)), Ireland is ranked 20th in the Global Top 100 for

2012 and is identified as one of five countries to watch, on the basis of a marked increase in the number of its publications in Nature Publishing Group research journals. Watchers could be disappointed when the next index is released.

Ireland's research output is under threat. Research career frameworks are being formulated and implemented by several major Irish universities. These effectively limit researchers' careers to six years through the enforcement of an 'up or out' policy, whereby they must either secure increased funding to rise through the ranks, or leave the university.

There is now a real risk that Ireland's talented researchers will be forced out as they reach the end of their allotted research time. They are left with the choice of going into industry, moving abroad to continue their research, or dropping out of science.

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## New electricity grids must develop in sync

Future US and European electricity systems will depend on the harmonious evolution of low- and medium-voltage 'smart' grids with high-voltage 'super' grids (see M. Amin *Nature* **499**, 145–147; 2013). Without care, these two developments could undermine, rather than reinforce, one another.

Both smart and super grids involve three layers (see [go.nature.com/7flk7s](http://go.nature.com/7flk7s)): physical (power flows), cyber (information technology) and socio-economic (stakeholders). There are important issues in the physical layer, but the greatest tensions will emerge in the socio-economic layer as self-interested stakeholders advance local or continental interests.

Smart grids relate to local consumers becoming electricity

producers themselves. This could diminish the need for high-voltage transmission grids as local power starts to serve nearby users.

Super grids will help to integrate massive renewable sources and to ensure reliability. Their development will be led by transmission companies at a time when those businesses must adapt to emerging smart grids.

If smart and super approaches are not aligned, the result will be a frailer electricity system. It is not just technologies that need to match up: policy regulations and market structures must do so too.

Smartness should not just be an issue for better local grids, but for the electricity system as a whole.

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## Curb clearance for oil-palm plantations

We question whether using accurate genotyping to enhance palm-oil yields will greatly reduce the acreage devoted to palm-oil plantations (R. Singh *et al. Nature* <http://doi.org/ndc>; 2013).

Global demand for palm oil by the food industry and for biofuel is rising, pushing expansion of plantations into forests and peatlands. As higher yields generate bigger profits, more companies will venture into palm-oil production and marginal lands may be developed.

Moves to increase palm-oil yields should therefore be combined with strict government controls on the expansion of existing plantations into environmentally sensitive areas.

Some countries have imposed restrictions on new plantation licences, but with limited success. In Indonesia, for example, the recent severe widespread smoke haze was mainly associated with peatland clearance for oil

palms, and almost half of these fires occurred in areas with a moratorium for new licences (see [go.nature.com/doiwwf](http://go.nature.com/doiwwf)).

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## Seize diplomats smuggling ivory

One route for the smuggling of wildlife parts, such as rhino horn and elephant ivory, could be closed without the need for new international conventions or treaties (B. I. Kaaria and N. L. Muchiri *Proc. 9th Int. Conf. Environ. Compliance Enforc.* 204–208; 2011). Rogue diplomats must be stopped from exploiting their consular immunity to flout customs regulations and support this illicit trade.

The scale of the problem is unquantifiable, but anecdotal evidence indicates that it is widespread. Diplomatic bags containing horn were reported to be evading customs checks as long ago as the 1980s (E. B. Martin *Pachyderm* **21**, 28–34; 1996). In 2011, a South Korean diplomat was caught smuggling ivory (see [go.nature.com/fuo43s](http://go.nature.com/fuo43s)).

Countries could adopt the UK practice of giving full immunity only to diplomats who are accredited to that country; others who pass through British territory are subject to regular checks. Because there are few direct flights between African and Asian capitals, diplomats would run the risk of also being checked at European airports when changing flights.

Apprehending diplomats carrying illegal materials would generate negative publicity, forcing countries to punish errant civil servants and reduce the problem. Immunity should not mean impunity.

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