



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Times letters: Vaccine approval and safety measures

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Sir, Following encouraging efficacy data from three Covid-19 vaccine candidates, the focus is shifting to safety as vaccines are distributed ([“NHS gears up for Britain’s greatest mass vaccination”](#), Dec 3). The government announced last week that Covid-19 will be added to the vaccine damages payment scheme so that in the extremely unlikely circumstances that serious side-effects occur, compensation can be granted via this no-fault scheme covering people who have been severely disabled as a result of vaccination.

There are, however, numerous problems with this scheme: the severe disablement threshold requires a 60 per cent disability which is too high and not well adapted to potential vaccine damage injuries; the £120,000 payment under the scheme is inequitable in case of serious injuries, and below comparable court awards.

Building on the recent Cumberlege review recommendations on medicine safety, the Covid-19 pandemic would have been the ideal opportunity to implement a new accessible, effective, and equitable bespoke compensation scheme. Widespread uptake of Covid-19 vaccination will depend not only on making vaccine recipients feel that they are protected from a dangerous virus but also shielded in the case of extremely unlikely inadvertent harm.

**Professor Duncan Fairgrieve**, British Institute of International and Comparative Law; **Soren Holm**, professor of bioethics,

University of Manchester; **Geraint Howells**, professor of commercial law, University of Manchester; **Dr Claas Kirchhelle**, University College Dublin; **Dr Samantha Vanderslott**, University of Oxford

Sir, The UK medicines regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) led by June Raine ([“Rise of patients’ champion who shuns limelight”](#), Dec 5), is the largest such agency in Europe and has particular expertise in vaccines. Before Brexit it frequently led the scientific assessment of new vaccines for the EU, including the accelerated assessments of pandemic swine flu vaccines. On December 2 the MHRA approved a highly effective vaccine against the virus causing Covid-19. That approval was granted under EU law and could be recognised by all member states. EU health ministers, however, have decided on a “harmonised” process of approval through the European Medicines Agency (EMA) which will be concluded in early January at the earliest. No plausible reason has been offered to justify a month’s delay. EU health ministers should immediately reverse their decision, or explain to their populations the public health cost of the policy they have adopted.

**Sir Kent Woods**

Chief executive, MHRA, 2004-13; chairman, EMA, 2011-15;  
Leicester

Sir, Martin Paltnoi and Dr Harry Hill compare the slower US drug approval process unfavourably with its UK equivalent ([letters](#), Dec 5). When thousands of babies in Germany and England were being born with severe defects, due to their mothers’ use of thalidomide, the drug was still awaiting approval in the US.

**Dr John Doherty**

Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

Sir, Politicians are lining up to show support for the vaccines by offering to be the first to have one ([Carol Midgley](#), Dec 5). I suggest they be the last; it might get the job done quicker.

**Peter Hehir**

Wytham, Oxon

### ENFORCING HUNT LAW

Sir, The continuing farce of the Hunting Act 2004 reflects poorly on parliament and hunts alike (“[Hunts halted as police investigate ‘plot to dodge law’](#)”, Nov 27).

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The terms of the act mean that prospects of a successful investigation and prosecution are slim since only the most blatant offences are capable of being prosecuted. Inchoate offences such as conspiracy and incitement are likely to prove even more problematic. The opportunities for those determined to continue pursuing foxes to avoid consequences through obfuscation are endless, creating problems for law enforcement and those wishing to pursue lawful alternatives.

My 2014 report on the RSPCA suggested that hunts could reduce the suspicion of “something to hide” through greater transparency about how they pursue alternatives such as trail hunting; your report describes the opposite. Parliament should recast the law to make it enforceable without disproportionate cost.

Unenforceable law is no law; and its disregard by society’s influencers soon undermines the rule of law.

**Stephen Wooler**

HM Chief Inspector of the CPS, 2000-10; independent reviewer of RSPCA prosecution activity, 2014

### HONG KONG JUSTICE

Sir, Your leader (“[Denial of Justice](#)”, Dec 4) rightly praises Hong Kong’s independent judiciary as “the life blood of its success, economically and culturally” but ends by labelling its court of final appeal as a “Beijing-driven court”. This might surprise

Lords Sumption and Hoffmann who have just been sitting there, or Lord Hodge who recently accepted appointment. The British commitment adds jurisprudential wisdom, provides a morale boost, and fulfils a guarantee given by the Sino-British Joint Declaration.

Local judges are under increasing pressure as politically sensitive offences from the 2019 vandalism come up for trial at the same time as the mainland calls for judicial reform and a sentencing council.

A boycott now would dismay both the international business community and the local judiciary. Cases under the imposed national security law are unlikely to involve judges who are not Chinese nationals.

**Michael Thomas, QC**

Attorney-general of Hong Kong, 1983-88

#### **TEACHER TRAINING**

Sir, It was heartening to read that teacher training targets have been met for the first time in eight years (report, Dec 4), but disappointing that there remains a paucity of applicants in key subjects. The national school-centred initial teacher training (Scitt) schemes for maths, physics and languages are tackling the deficit. Credit to Nick Gibb, the schools minister, who has supported these schemes through a difficult gestation period. They are now bearing fruit. While applicants train in independent and maintained schools, a majority of those who qualify are securing work in the state sector. Dulwich College is proud to support this project.

**Joe Spence**

Master, Dulwich College

#### **FAMILY COURT DELAYS**

Sir, As your article (Law, Dec 3) records, the pandemic has caused unacceptable delays to legal proceedings in the family justice system. Family arbitration can play an important part in assisting families affected by these delays and in relieving the burden on the courts. In a recent decision, the Court of Appeal recognised the role in resolving family law disputes played by arbitrations conducted under the aegis of the Institute of Family Law Arbitrators. IFLA, a not-for-profit organisation, runs a scheme that provides information, guidance and assistance in connection with family law arbitrations, and trains retired judges and senior lawyers as arbitrators.

Arbitration in matters affecting children, as well as in money matters, would be an appropriate dispute resolution procedure in most of the cases that are suffering severe delays in the family courts. Arbitration is quicker than litigation, conducted in private, and more affordable than might be expected. It is not the solution in every case, but it could undoubtedly help to mitigate the present substantial strain on the family courts, and the consequent frustration and unhappiness caused to so many parents and children.

**Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury**

Chairman, Institute of Family Law Arbitrators; former president, Supreme Court

**BAMBOO ADVICE**

Sir, Ann Treneman need not despair with her Sisyphean task of removing bamboo ([Dec 4](#)). Wait until the plant is growing then cut the canes to 15in. Fill the hollows with a weak glyphosate mixture which will be carried to the growing points. An enzyme will do its work over summer.

**Christopher Pearman**

Oxted, Surrey

**BANISHED PHRASES**

Sir, Although girls from Essex are doubtless just as admirable (or otherwise) as girls from other parts of the world, the decision to remove the term “Essex girl” from the Advanced Learners’ Dictionary ([report](#), Dec 5) does have a downside. The term’s banishment will mean that foreign language students who use this dictionary might fail to know what the phrase means in common parlance. Offensive or not, surely it is best for anybody learning a foreign language to be accurately informed of this, rather than be kept in ignorance. Despite the good intentions of campaigners and compliant dictionary compilers, there seems no reason why once a phrase that is deemed offensive is removed, others should not follow. Dictionaries would then become not so much a record of how language is used or has been used, but a guidebook for how some people think language should be used.

**David Harris**

Poole, Dorset

**IRON LADY’S BRONZE**

Sir, Of course Mrs Thatcher should have a statue ([Thunderer](#), Dec 4), but not the one turned down in 2018 by Westminster city council which has ended up in Grantham. It is nowhere good enough. There is no hint of the iron lady in this bronze monstrosity. She looks like the demure mayoress of a modest

provincial town. Westminster council asked Mark and Carol Thatcher to signify their approval. The council made clear that it had not received this approval when it rejected the object.

**Lord Lexden**

Conservative Party historian

**IT TAKES TWO . . .**

Sir, I disagree with Janice Turner ([Dec 3](#)) that sharing a bike is as naff as wearing matching outfits. A tandem enables a couple, usually mismatched in fitness, to cycle further. The “stoker” sits at the back, supplying power. The “captain”, at the front, requires considerable upper-body strength to steer. Hence, usually the husband sits at the front and the wife at the back. Being tall helps to see what is coming, but the stoker relies on the captain to keep them informed. It’s called communication; good on a tandem and in a marriage.

**Gillian Swinson**

Member, Tandem Club of Great Britain; Cheltenham

Sir, My uncle, at Cambridge in the 1920s, built a four-person tandem bike. His fellow student riders wore top hats which they raised when passing a don. My mother, tied to the back in a bath chair, waved a rattle.

**Jenny Botsford**

London W9

**KETTLE CUISINE**

Sir, The quarantined chef is not the first to attempt to cook dinner with just a kettle ([report](#), Dec 5). When I was a student the kettle in our floor’s kitchen had to be replaced six times in a term, having been destroyed by attempts to use it for boiling eggs — they explode. Years later, a friend who runs luxury hotels on Indian Ocean islands said staff frequently had to replace kettles after they had been used in an effort to cook seafood caught from the villas’ decks, despite the all-inclusive restaurants nearby.

**Charlie Rapple**

Oxford

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