

THIS WEEK

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Not on the list

The World Health Organization should not allow political stand-offs to dictate who attends its meetings and set back progress in global public health.

Taiwan's health minister arrived in Switzerland on Sunday for the annual meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) in Geneva, but as *Nature* went to press he was not allowed to attend. For almost a decade, Taiwan — despite not being a member of the United Nations — has been permitted to attend WHO events as an observer. But its invitation for this year's event in Geneva never arrived.

That's because of the rising political tensions between Taiwan and the Chinese government in Beijing. China does not recognize Taiwan as a state, and Taiwanese officials were previously invited to the WHO meeting with the approval of Beijing. The hard line from the Chinese mainland towards the island's latest government, which took office last May, has placed the WHO between a diplomatic rock and a hard place.

It is not surprising that global health has become ensnared in world politics in this way, but it's still disappointing — particularly given that it deflates the mood of cooperation that had allowed Taiwan to participate since 2009.

That arrangement followed Taiwan's 2003 exclusion from WHO discussions on how to contain the outbreak of the SARS virus — which roamed across both the island and the Chinese mainland. Taiwan raised a fuss about that decision. There is no way to know whether the exclusion hampered its efforts to control the virus. (The epidemiologist Chen Chien-Jen, who was Taiwan's health minister at the time, says that this was the case.) But despite being one of the last places to be hit by the outbreak, the island struggled to limit the damage — 181 people there died (K.-T. Chen *et al. Int. J. Infect. Dis.* **9**, 77–85; 2005).

The WHO recognizes the UN's 1971 decision that Taiwan is part of the People's Republic of China, led by Beijing.

In the wake of SARS, however, tensions eased and business, as well as scientific collaborations, boomed across the strait. Taiwan was given its observer status in 2009. The irony of this week's clash is that Beijing's harder attitude towards Taiwan is partly a product of work on public health. The president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-wen, picked the epidemiologist Chen — now vice-president — to be her running mate in last year's election. It was Chen, as health minister, who helped to stem the SARS crisis in 2003, and his celebrity status for doing so is credited as a factor in Tsai's landslide victory.

Tsai is from the Democratic Progressive Party. Although the party has historically been in favour of independence, Tsai and Chen have both pledged not to upend relations with China. That doesn't seem to have placated the mainland. The WHO event is merely the latest in a series of international meetings for which an invitation to Taiwan has been withheld or withdrawn.

How much does Taiwan's apparent exclusion matter? Microbes, as the cliché goes, carry no passports and respect no boundaries. Collaboration is one way to tackle the threat of infectious disease — a threat that is increasing. So, this logic argues, any obstacle to collaboration

worsens the outlook. Media coverage of the political stand-off has dutifully warned that the exclusion of Taiwan will be a disaster for public health — there and elsewhere.

Several prominent epidemiologists and infectious-disease experts contacted by *Nature* were adamant that Taiwan should be allowed to attend. "Politics should not get in the way of infectious disease, which knows no boundaries," said one. Because Taiwan is a node for international trade and travel, isolating it "is both risky and dangerous", said another. Some also commented on the contributions being made by Taiwan's impressive public-health and biomedical-research infrastructure: "Isolating it would be counterproductive to global health."

But others said that the meeting is purely symbolic. One said that the research in the area goes through publications and informal networks, not the WHO. "WHO meetings play an insignificant role in international research activities." Another agreed: "Researchers will work together regardless of whether Taiwan is allowed to attend."

Some were confident that, in a similar way, the health community can also overcome barriers erected by politicians. "I expect the WHO officials will have back-door channels with Taiwanese health officials to find out urgent information, for example about outbreaks of avian influenza or other emerging infectious diseases."

As China seems to have recognized in years past, in public-health terms Taiwan's presence at WHO meetings is good for everyone. If politics disrupts that, then people on both sides of the divide and the strait must hope that faith in the informal global infectious-disease control network is not misplaced. And when (not if) a new health emergency comes, China must ensure that Taiwanese health officials and researchers are not kept out of the loop. ■

Intelligence test

Modern genetics can rescue the study of intelligence from a history marred by racism.

“What most people know about intelligence is, at best, distorted and, at worst, just wrong.” That's according to the editor of the journal *Intelligence*, in a 2014 special issue that addressed the teaching of the subject (*Intelligence* **42**, 135; 2014). The same issue found that there was in fact little teaching about intelligence at all, at least on the undergraduate psychology curricula of