With reference to Mexican flu

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To the editor:

Following the recent emergence of an Influenza virus variant in Mexico and the threat of its pandemic potential, both the media and scientific experts spontaneously referred to 'Mexican flu'. However, the name secondarily used by WHO to designate this virus was 'Influenza A(H1N1) virus'. This refers to the scientific designation of the taxonomic species Influenza A virus combined with the associated haemagglutinin/neuraminidase subtypes. Unfortunately, this is wholly inappropriate for identifying the current variant and novel virus. Following the same logic the virus that caused the 1918–1919 Spanish influenza pandemic, as well as the dominant virus that caused seasonal flu last winter in the USA, would also be called 'Influenza A(H1N1) virus'. Just imagine the confusion that this could cause.

To designate a virus, a vernacular or a scientific name can be used. Regarding the relevant taxonomic designation, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses has recommended for years that geographical information should be included in the designation of virus strains and even virus species. For example, the designation of influenza virus strains commonly includes the location of the virus isolation {e.g. Influenza A virus [A/Mexico/4603/2009(H1N1)]}. Indeed, by analogy with West Nile virus, Kedougou virus, Rift Valley fever virus and

many others, the designation of the influenza virus variant should evoke the location of initial discovery of the disease. Accordingly, referring to Mexico, the country where the disease first appeared as a Public Health problem and, by extension, using the vernacular name 'Mexican flu virus' is not in contradiction with the logic of taxonomic nomenclature.

Why was the name Mexican flu virus disallowed by health authorities? This seems to be linked with the 'politically correct' fear of stigmatising Mexican people. However, when the term 'Spanish flu' is used, we do not blame the Spanish people. We simply recognise the subject of discussion and newsworthiness. Similarly, the name 'Mexican flu' evokes the influenza outbreak that emerged in the Mexican population, without blaming the Mexican people. It precisely designates the current episode, reminds us that it's first recognised victims were Mexicans, and enables to distinguish the new virus from seasonal H1N1 variants that may circulate simultaneously. Globally, this is much more efficient than the recommended 'official' name: if it does not appear to satisfy the questionable needs of political correctness, the vernacular name is perfectly acceptable for the purpose of informing the world in a simple, scientifically relevant and informative manner.

Why is it incorrect to speak about the Mexican flu?