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1 Switches Induced by Quorum Sensing in a Model of Enzyme-loaded Microparticles

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## 4 **Abstract**

5 Quorum sensing refers to the ability of bacteria and other single-celled organisms to respond to  
6 changes in cell density or number with population-wide changes in behaviour. Here, simulations were  
7 performed to investigate quorum sensing in groups of diffusively-coupled enzyme microparticles using  
8 a well characterised autocatalytic reaction which raises the pH of the medium: hydrolysis of urea by  
9 urease. The enzyme urease is found in both plants and microorganisms and has been widely exploited  
10 in engineering processes. We demonstrate how increases in group size can be used to achieve a  
11 sigmoidal switch in pH at high enzyme loading, oscillations in pH at intermediate enzyme loading and  
12 a bistable, hysteretic switch at low enzyme loading. Thus, quorum sensing can be exploited to obtain  
13 different types of response in the same system, depending on the enzyme concentration. The  
14 implications for microorganisms in colonies are discussed and the results could help in the design of  
15 synthetic quorum sensing for biotechnology applications such as drug delivery.

16

17 Keywords: feedback, quorum sensing, enzyme microparticles, switches, oscillations

18

## 19 **1. Introduction**

20 The remarkable ability of cellular biological systems to coordinate activity has fascinated scientist for  
21 decades. The term quorum sensing was first applied to bacteria that displayed a population-wide  
22 change in behaviour above a critical density or number of cells, driven by production and release of a  
23 small diffusible molecule, the autoinducer, into the environment [1, 2]. In bacteria, increases in cell  
24 density can induce bioluminescence and biofilm formation that protects the cells from antibiotics [3].  
25 Other micro-organisms such as yeast and the slime mold, *Dictyostelium discoideum*, display density-  
26 dependent dynamics including synchronised chemical oscillations above a critical cell density [4, 5].  
27 These oscillations play an important part in the life-cycle of *D. discoideum* as they result in travelling  
28 waves of cyclic AMP used to direct the motion of cells and formation of multicellular slugs when  
29 individual cells are starving [6].

30 More recently quorum sensing has inspired the investigation of synchronous behaviour in  
31 various systems including inorganic catalytic micro-particles [7, 8], electronic circuits [9, 10], laser  
32 arrays [11] and genetically modified organisms [12]. Although diverse in their underlying mechanisms,  
33 common to these systems is some internal means of amplifying a signal (positive feedback) and  
34 communication of the signal via a common surround. Combined, these factors drive a sudden sharp  
35 change in state across the whole population. Switch-like, ultrasensitive responses can arise in cellular  
36 systems through a number of mechanisms; positive feedback is generally required for bistability and  
37 oscillations [13]. Applications are beginning to emerge, for example a synthetic quorum sensing circuit  
38 in genetically modified bacteria has been exploited for pulsatile drug delivery in vivo [14]. Enzyme-  
39 loaded particles or vesicles also have potential applications in medicine [15] and are excellent  
40 candidates for synthetic quorum sensing, but evidence of this behaviour has not been reported to  
41 date.

42 Mathematical modelling and simulations have provided insight into quorum sensing in both  
43 natural and synthetic systems [16-20]. Here, simulations were performed in order to determine the  
44 behaviour of groups of enzyme-loaded microparticles in a bath of substrate solution. An enzyme-  
45 catalysed reaction was chosen that displays positive feedback through the pH; the urea-urease  
46 reaction. This reaction is well characterised and occurs across a variety of plants and cellular organisms

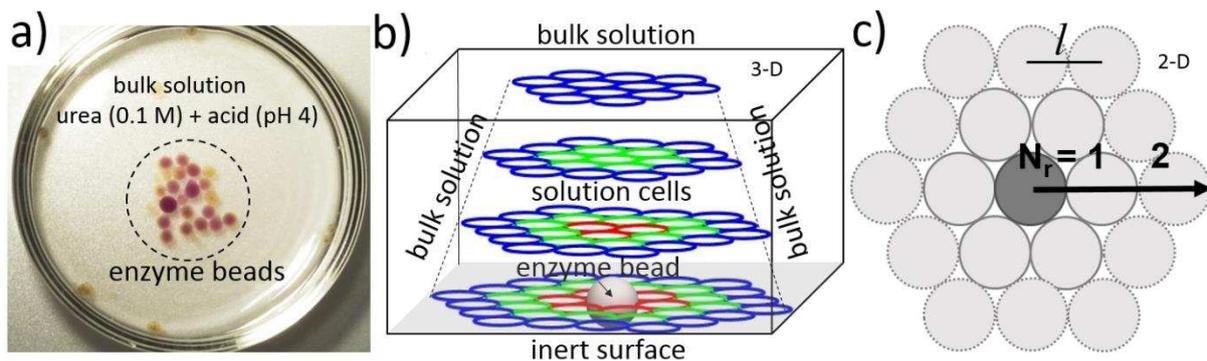
47 [21, 22]. The enzyme urease is a virulence factor produced by certain bacteria and, conversely, has  
 48 been used in engineering applications [23], materials synthesis [24, 25] and self-propelled micro- or  
 49 nanomotors [26, 27]. Our goal was to determine the types of response that might be obtained with  
 50 changes in group size under reaction-diffusion conditions.

51 The model was inspired by ureolytic bacteria such as *Helicobacter pylori* in the acidic, non-  
 52 buffered environment of the stomach and *Proteus mirabilis* which colonises the urinary tract and  
 53 devices such as catheters [28]. Both of these micro-organisms produce urease to break down urea and  
 54 make ammonia thereby raising the pH of their environment. They also form biofilms – communities  
 55 of micro-organisms attached to a surface (eg catheter wall) and embedded in glue-like extracellular  
 56 polymeric substances (EPS). Small molecules, such as acid and urea, diffuse between the biofilm and  
 57 the external solution whereas enzymes are typically confined to the biofilm. Here we used simulations  
 58 to determine the collective behaviour of urease-loaded cells under similar conditions.

59 We show that different transitions can be obtained with quorum sensing in the same system.  
 60 Three sharp transitions in state, given by the pH, were obtained with increasing the number of  
 61 diffusively-coupled urease beads: a sigmoidal switch (a buzzer), oscillations (blinker) and a bistable  
 62 switch (toggle) - dynamical responses that all play an important role in the functioning of cells [29, 30].  
 63 The generic features are likely to be observed in numerous confined enzyme catalysed reactions that  
 64 show feedback. The implications of the results are discussed with regards to cellular organisms, as  
 65 well as for applications in biotechnology.  
 66

## 67 2. Model

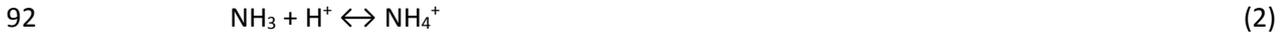
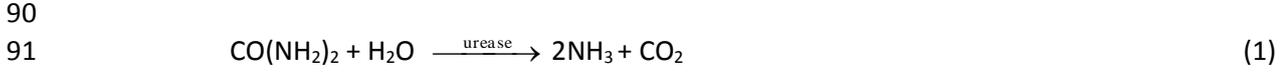
68 The model is designed to mimic experiments [31] in which polymer beads were loaded with the  
 69 enzyme urease and placed in a solution of acid (pH 4) and urea in a petri-dish. In earlier work [31, 32]  
 70 we explored the behaviour of individual beads. Now we consider the situation, illustrated in Figure 1a,  
 71 in which a group of beads are placed in close proximity and loaded with pH indicator to show the  
 72 change in pH when the reaction occurs. Complete conversion of urea to ammonia takes several days,  
 73 hence the concentrations in the bulk solution are approximately constant over several hours. The  
 74 experimental set-up is a grossly simplified version of the biofilm scenario described in the  
 75 introduction, however it demonstrates the feasibility of observing the behaviours *in vitro*.  
 76



77 Figure 1. (a) Illustration of an experimental set-up with urease-loaded polymer beads placed on the  
 78 base of a 5 cm diameter petri-dish containing 50 ml solution of urea (0.1 M) and acid (pH 4). The  
 79 enzyme beads contained a pH indicator which is yellow when acidic and purple when basic (pH > 7.5).  
 80 (b) The computational domain used in simulations showing in this case a single urease-loaded cell as  
 81 a sphere (number of enzyme beads  $N_T = 1$ ) and the surrounding solution cells as circles ( $N_S = 94$ ). The  
 82 enzyme bead is directly coupled to the solution cells in red; green cells are next neighbours and blue  
 83 cells show 3<sup>rd</sup> neighbours. The blue solution cells at the edge of the domain are coupled to the bulk  
 84 solution with constant concentrations of urea and acid. (c) A 2-D slice of the domain showing a group  
 85

86 of hexagonally packed enzyme beads with number of rows  $N_r = 2$  and  $N_T = 19$ . The length scale of cells  
 87 in simulations was  $l = 100 \mu\text{m}$ .

88 The urea-urease reaction results in production of ammonia and an increase in pH through the  
 89 following overall processes:



93  
 94 Following on from our earlier work, the full model of the reaction was reduced to two variables,  
 95 preserving the generic behaviour of the system (see supplementary information for more detail). The  
 96 rate of change of substrate concentration,  $S$ , and acid concentration,  $\text{H}^+$ , was given by:

97 
$$\begin{aligned} \frac{dS}{dt} &= D_S \nabla_{\text{hcp}}^2 S - R \\ \frac{d\text{H}^+}{dt} &= \left[ D_H \nabla_{\text{hcp}}^2 \left( \text{H}^+ - \frac{K_W}{\text{H}^+} \right) - 2R \right] \left( 1 + \frac{K_W}{\text{H}^{+2}} \right)^{-1} \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

98 where  $\nabla_{\text{hcp}}^2$  denotes the discrete Laplacian for hexagonal close packing,  $D_S$  and  $D_H$  are diffusion  
 99 constants of substrate urea:  $D_S = 1.4 \times 10^{-5} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$  and acid:  $D_H = 9 \times 10^{-5} \text{ cm}^2 \text{ s}^{-1}$ ,  $K_W$  is the water ion  
 100 product from the equilibrium:



103 and  $R$  is the rate of the enzyme catalysed step:

104 
$$R = \frac{V_{\text{max}} S}{(K_M + S) \left( 1 + \frac{K_{\text{es}2}}{\text{H}^+} + \frac{\text{H}^+}{K_{\text{es}1}} \right)} \quad (5)$$

105 This is a modified Michaelis-Menten expression [33, 34] that takes into account the bell-shaped  
 106 enzyme rate dependence on acid concentration where  $K_{\text{ES}1}$  and  $K_{\text{ES}2}$  are the binding constants of the  
 107 enzyme to acid:  $K_{\text{ES}1} = 5 \times 10^{-6} \text{ M}$ ,  $K_{\text{ES}2} = 2 \times 10^{-9} \text{ M}$ . The maximum enzyme rate  $V_{\text{max}}$  was given by  $V_{\text{max}} =$   
 108  $k_e E$  where  $k_e = 3.7 \times 10^{-6} \text{ M s}^{-1} \text{ u}^{-1} \text{ ml}$  and  $E = [\text{enzyme}]$  in  $\text{u/ml}$ : the enzyme concentration was in  
 109 units/ml (M/min/ml) in order to compare with experimental data for urease [22]; and the Michaelis  
 110 constant was  $K_m = 3 \times 10^{-3} \text{ M}$ .

111 Reaction-diffusion simulations were performed on a 3-D hexagonal close packed (hcp) coarse  
 112 grid of spatial step size  $l = 100 \mu\text{m}$ . The hexagonal packing and length scale were chosen to be  
 113 amenable to future experimental investigations involving  $\sim 100$  micron-sized enzyme-loaded beads  
 114 submerged in a solution of acid and urea. The coarse grid approach allowed us to obtain data from  
 115 multiple runs in order to map out behaviour in phase space with both homogeneous and  
 116 heterogeneous distributions in enzyme loading. It also allowed us to simulate over a thousand  
 117 enzyme-loaded beads with a total length scale  $> 1 \text{ cm}$  on a reasonable timescale. A similar approach  
 118 has been taken for modelling heterogeneous biofilms in 3-D [35].

119 The computational domain consisted of two types of cell - enzyme-loaded cells (domain  $\Omega_E$ )  
 120 on an inert surface (i.e. the base of the petri-dish) and solution cells (domain  $\Omega_S$ ) containing urea and  
 121 acid but no enzyme to represent a thin solution layer at the interface of enzyme loaded beads and the  
 122 bulk solution (Figure 1b). The total number of cells in a given simulation was given by the sum of the  
 123 enzyme cells and the neighbouring solution cells. Urea and acid diffuse in from the bulk solution  
 124 through domain  $\Omega_S$  and are consumed in the beads resulting in a gradient of these species. We found

125 that with at least three neighbours of solution cells around the enzyme beads the concentrations of  
126 acid and substrate approached the constant, bulk solution values smoothly.

127 The total number of enzyme beads was given by  $N_T = 3N_r(N_r + 1) + 1$  where  $N_r$  indicated the  
128 number of rows of enzyme cells after the central cell; an example with  $N_r = 2$  is shown in Figure 1c.  
129 Changes in group size were achieved by increasing the number of rows of beads. The initial conditions  
130 for enzyme beads (domain  $\Omega_E$ ) at  $t = 0$  were given by:

$$131 \\ 132 S|_{\Omega_E} = 0 \text{ M and } H^+|_{\Omega_E} = 1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ M with } E = E_0$$

133  
134 The solution cells contained no enzyme thus  $R = 0$ . The initial conditions for solution cells  
135 (domain  $\Omega_S$ ) at  $t = 0$  were given by:

$$136 \\ 137 S|_{\Omega_S} = S_0 \text{ and } H^+|_{\Omega_S} = H_0 \text{ with } E = 0$$

138  
139 where  $S_0$  and  $H_0$  are the bulk solution concentrations. The value of  $H_0$  in all simulations was  $1 \times 10^{-4}$  M  
140 ( $\text{pH}_0 = 4$ ) whilst  $S_0$  and  $E_0$  were varied.

141 A Dirichlet boundary condition was applied at the sides and top of the solution cells (boundary  
142  $\partial\Omega_s$ ) to provide the cells with a constant supply of substrate and acid from the bulk solution (i.e. the  
143 solution in the rest of the petri-dish):

$$144 \\ 145 S|_{\partial\Omega_s} = S_0 \text{ and } H^+|_{\partial\Omega_s} = H_0$$

146  
147 No-flux Neuman boundary conditions were applied at the base of the domain (boundary  $\partial\Omega_b$ ) to  
148 simulate the diffusion barrier at the base of the petri-dish:

$$149 \\ 150 \nabla S|_{\partial\Omega_b} = 0 \text{ and } \nabla H^+|_{\partial\Omega_b} = 0$$

151  
152 For heterogeneous loadings, simulations were performed using a normal (Gaussian) random number  
153 generator for enzyme concentration, with mean  $\mu_E$  and coefficient of variation  $\sigma = 10 - 30\%$ . Data from  
154 eleven runs with different initial spatial distributions of enzyme was collected for each value of  $\mu_E$  and  
155  $\sigma$  and the number of times a resultant behaviour (high pH steady state, oscillatory, low pH steady  
156 state) occurred was recorded relative to the total number of runs.

157

## 158 **3. Results**

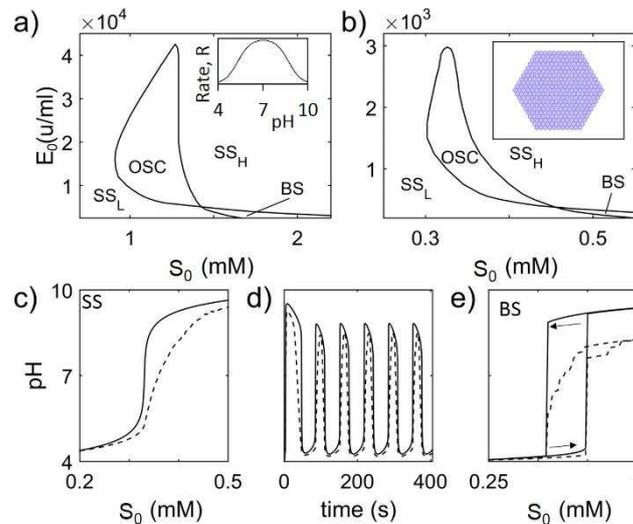
### 159 **3.1 Switches with substrate**

160  
161 The behaviour of a single enzyme bead in substrate solution was mapped out in enzyme-  
162 substrate space (Fig. 2a). Positive feedback in the urea-urease reaction is driven by the product,  
163 ammonia, and the bell-shaped rate-pH curve (inset, Fig. 2a). The maximum enzyme rate is at pH 7,  
164 correlated with a maximum in the active form of the enzyme. If the enzyme is in a solution of acid, the  
165 rate is initially low. The production of ammonia raises the pH and rate of reaction accelerates. Negative  
166 feedback was provided by the constant supply of acid by diffusion from the surrounding solution [32].

167 Although ammonia was not explicitly included in the two-variable model, its concentration is  
168 correlated with the pH. A cross-shaped phase diagram was obtained, where at low substrate,  $S_0$ , and  
169 enzyme concentration,  $E_0$ , the ammonia was produced at an insufficient rate compared to the influx  
170 of acid from the surround resulting in an unreacted, low pH steady state ( $SS_L$ ) in the bead. At high  $S_0$   
171 and  $E_0$  the rate of reaction is high enough to overcome the influx of acid and the bead switched to a  
172 reacted, high pH state ( $SS_H$ ). Separating these two states are regions of oscillations (OSC) or bistability

173 (BS) in pH. The results qualitatively agree with previous findings obtained in 2- and 8-variable  
 174 compartment models of the urea-urease reaction [32].

175 The phase diagram for a hexagonal array of beads with number of rows  $N_r = 10$  is shown in  
 176 Figure 2b. Increasing the number of beads shifted the high pH states to lower enzyme and substrate  
 177 concentrations, but the same general features were preserved. Three different types of transition  
 178 were obtained with increasing substrate: a sigmoidal switch in pH at high enzyme (Fig. 2c), switch to  
 179 oscillations at intermediate enzyme (Fig. 2d) and a bistable switch at low enzyme concentrations (Fig.  
 180 2e). The beads at the edge of the group typically had a lower pH than the central beads resulting in a  
 181 reduced average pH over the entire domain (dotted line). These transitions may be considered  
 182 switches in the sense that there is a sharp change from an “off” (low pH) state to an “on” (high pH)  
 183 state.



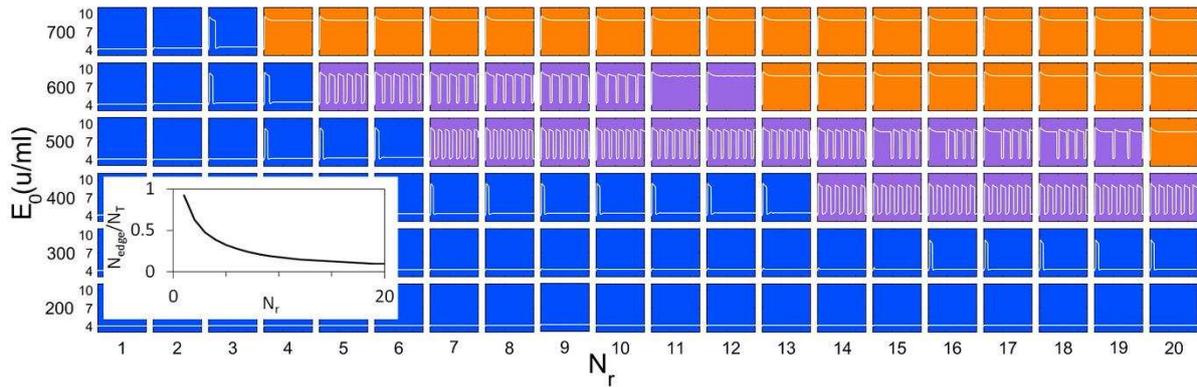
184 Figure 2. Phase diagram as a function of enzyme and substrate concentrations mapping dynamic  
 185 behaviour of (a) single 100  $\mu\text{m}$  bead and (b) group of 100  $\mu\text{m}$  beads with  $N_r = 10$  and low pH state  
 186 ( $SS_L$ ), high pH state ( $SS_H$ ), bistable (BS) and oscillatory (OSC). With  $N_r = 6$ : (c) sigmoidal switch in pH  
 187 with  $E_0 = 8000$  u/ml; (d) oscillations in time with  $E_0 = 1000$  u/ml; (e) bistable switch with  $E_0 = 200$  u/ml.  
 188 In (c – e) central bead pH (thick line) and average pH of the group (dotted line).  
 189

190  
 191

### 192 **3.2 Switches with group size**

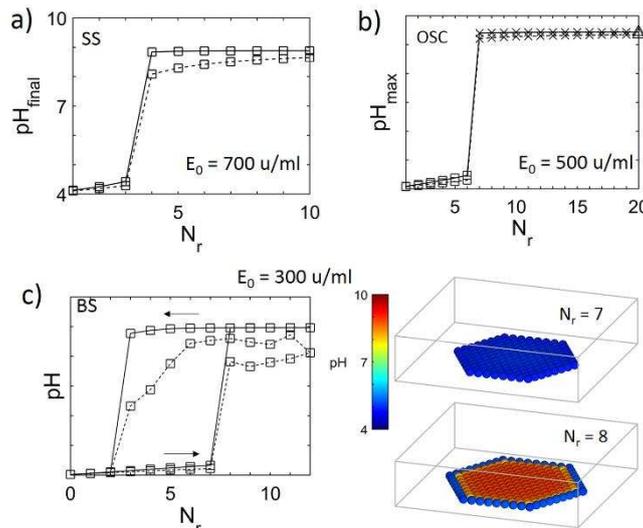
193

194 The same three types of transition were obtained if instead of increasing substrate, the concentration  
 195 of substrate was fixed and the number of rows of beads ( $N_r$ ) was increased. An  $E_0$ - $N_r$  phase diagram is  
 196 plotted in Figure 3 showing regions of low pH steady state (blue,  $SS_L$ ), oscillations (purple, OSC) and  
 197 high pH steady state (orange,  $SS_H$ ). Increasing  $N_r$  had a similar effect to increasing substrate. When the  
 198  $N_r$  is  $< 4$ , acid diffused in from the surround keeping the concentration of ammonia and the pH low in  
 199 the beads. The inset shows the number of beads at the edges or the array compared to total number  
 200 of beads ( $N_{\text{edge}}/N_T = 3/(3(N_r+1)+1/N_r)$ ). As  $N_r$  was increased, a smaller fraction of the beads was in  
 201 contact with the acid at the edges of the array and a sharp transition to a high pH state or oscillations  
 202 was obtained.  
 203



204 Figure 3. Phase diagram as a function of enzyme concentration and number of rows of enzyme beads  
 205 where blue =  $SS_L$ , purple = OSC and orange =  $SS_H$ . The tiles show the pH in time of the central bead and  
 206 the inset shows the ratio of edge beads to total beads with increasing  $N_r$ . The value of  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM.  
 207  
 208

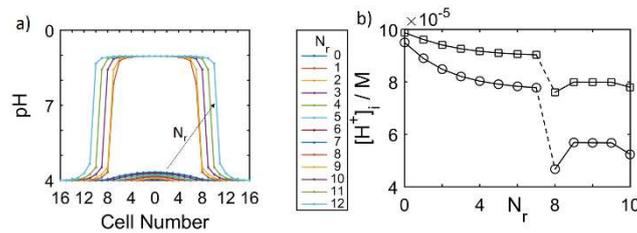
209 With  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM and  $E_0 = 600$  u/ml, a switch from low to high pH was obtained (Fig. 4a). When  
 210  $E_0$  was decreased, oscillations were observed above a threshold number of cells (Fig. 4b). A bistable  
 211 switch could not be obtained with reasonable values of  $N_r$  with  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM; the fraction of edge beads  
 212 approached zero with  $N_r = 20$ , thus little change was observed in the dynamics for larger number of  
 213 rows. However, bistability was obtained within the range  $N_r = 1 - 20$  when  $S = 0.5$  mM, as shown in  
 214 Figure 4c.



215 Figure 4. Switches in pH with number of rows of beads. (a) Sigmoidal switch, (b) switch to oscillations  
 216 (maximum pH shown), (c) bistable switch and pH of beads in the array with  $N_r = 7$  ( $SS_L$ ) and 8 ( $SS_H$ ).  
 217 The central bead pH (thick line) and average pH of the group (dotted line) are shown and  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM  
 218 in (a – b) and  $S_0 = 0.5$  mM in (c).  
 219  
 220

221 Quorum sensing is typically associated with increases in the autoinducer concentration in  
 222 solution and/or the rate of loss of autoinducer initiating autocatalysis as the number of cells is  
 223 increased (one does not necessarily imply the other) [8]. Here, the transition was correlated with the  
 224 change in pH and hence acid concentration. The pH profile across a central slice of the array is shown  
 225 in Figure 5a for the same conditions as in Figure 4c. For  $N_r < 8$ , the pH across the group was low ( $< 5$ ),  
 226 and a gradient in pH can be seen from the centre bead outwards. The pH was lowest at the edges of  
 227 the group where the beads were in contact with the acid solution from both the side and above. As  $N_r$   
 228 was increased, the pH of all the beads increased as a result of the decrease in the fraction of edge  
 229 beads. At  $N_r = 8$  there was a large amplitude increase in pH across the group. Correspondingly, the acid  
 230 concentration fell to a threshold level in both the edge beads and the adjacent solution cells up to  $N_r$

231 = 7 (Fig. 5b). Note however the difference between the edge beads and solution acid concentration  
 232 increased. So the increased reaction rate with increasing pH must overcome the increased influx rate  
 233 of acid to initiate autocatalysis.  
 234



235 Figure 5. Switch in pH with increasing number of rows from 1 – 12 for conditions in Figure 4c. (a) pH  
 236 profiles and (b) Concentration of acid in beads at the edge of the group (lower curve, circles) and  
 237 adjacent solution cells (upper curve, squares). Dashed lines indicate the transition to the high pH state.  
 238

239  
 240 With the substrate and acid concentrations fixed, the critical  $N_r$  for a change in state and the outcome  
 241 of the transition, whether to oscillations or high pH steady state, was determined by the enzyme  
 242 concentration. The threshold increased with decreasing  $E_0$  (Fig. 3).  
 243

### 244 3.2.1 Sigmoidal switch with $N_r$

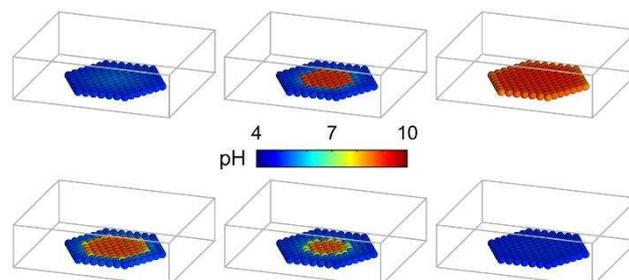
245 A sigmoidal switch in pH was obtained for sufficiently high enzyme ( $E_0 > 600$  u/ml in Fig. 3)  
 246 with increasing the number of rows of beads. Sigmoidal switches are reversible: in Figure 4a a large  
 247 amplitude increase in pH occurred as  $N_r$  was increased from 3 to 4 and decreasing  $N_r$  back to 3 resulted  
 248 in a drop back to low pH. This switch is referred to as a buzzer [29] because the “on” state is reached  
 249 whenever a parameter, here  $N_r$ , is raised above a single threshold value.  
 250

### 251 3.2.2 Bistable switch with $N_r$

252 Bistable switches in pH were obtained with a low concentration of enzyme ( $E_0 = 300$  u/ml in  
 253 Fig. 4c). The value of the pH was dependent on the system history. So if  $N_r$  was increased, the beads  
 254 remained in a low pH state until a threshold was reached at  $N_r = 8$  then the pH switched to high. If  $N_r$   
 255 was then decreased, the pH remained in a high state until the lower limit of  $N_r = 3$  when it dropped  
 256 back down. Between these values the low and high pH state coexisted. This is an example of a toggle  
 257 switch [29] in the sense that it can be flipped between the “on” (high pH) and “off” (low pH) states.  
 258

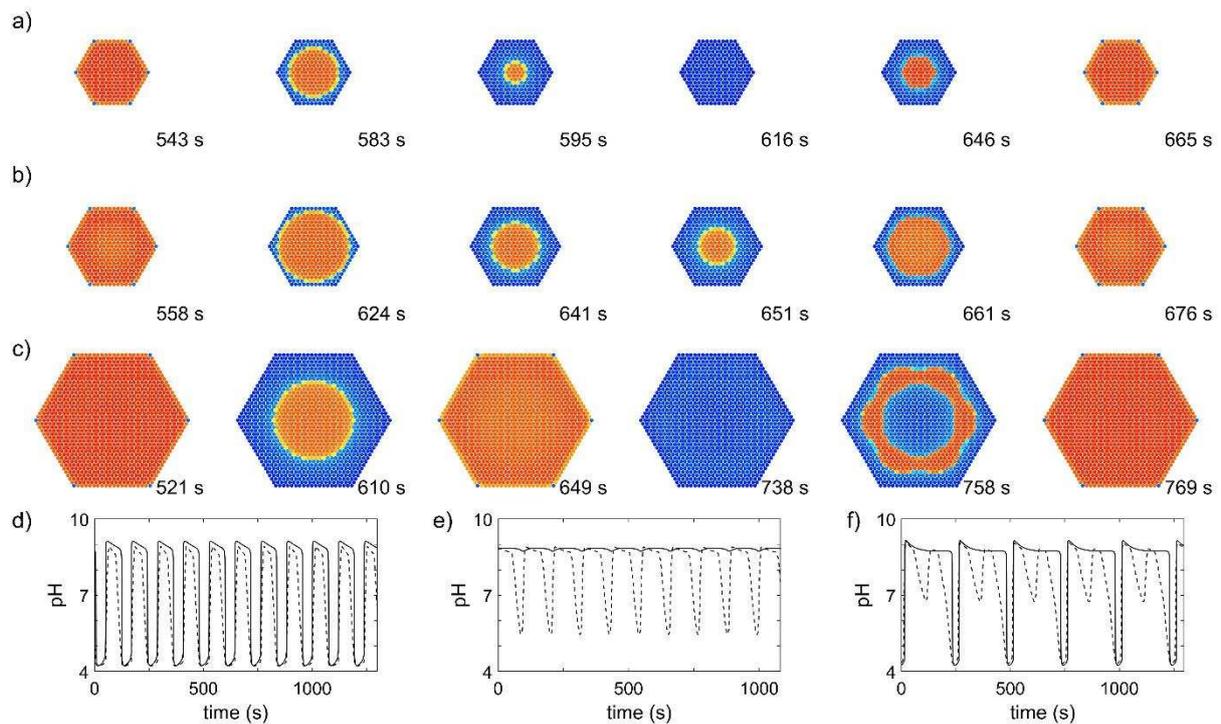
### 259 3.2.3 Oscillations with $N_r$

260 A transition to oscillatory behaviour occurred at intermediate enzyme levels ( $E_0 = 400 - 600$   
 261 u/ml in Fig. 3). A time series of the oscillatory state, referred to as a blinker [29], is shown in Figure 6.  
 262 The array did not oscillate uniformly; there was a phase lag between the centre and the outer edge of  
 263 the array.  
 264



265 Figure 6. Illustration of oscillatory behaviour in an array of urease beads with  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM,  $E_0 = 600$   
 266 u/ml and the number of rows of beads  $N_r = 6$  (surrounding solution cells not shown). Movie available  
 267 at [link](#).  
 268  
 269

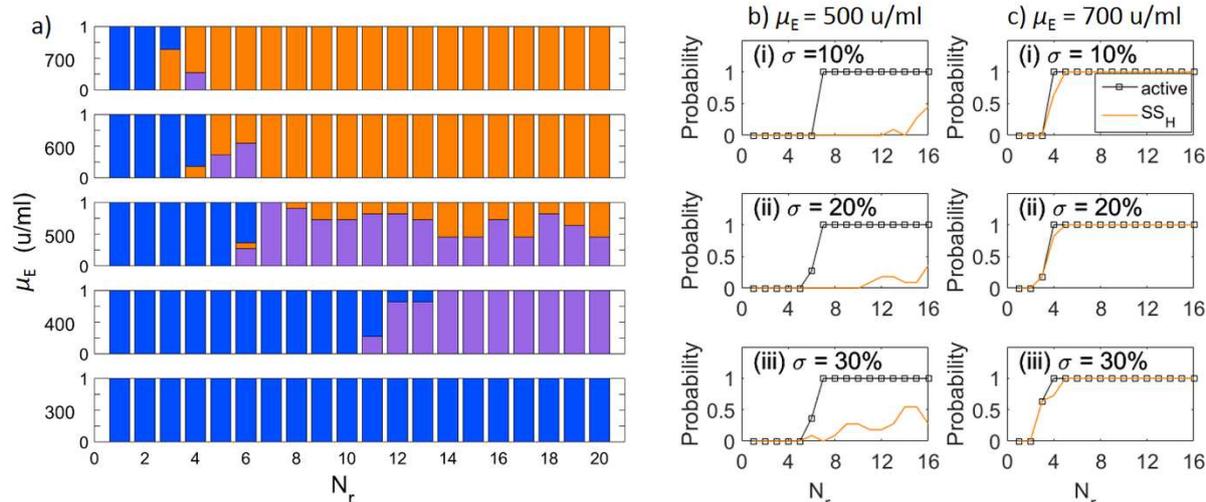
270 Different types of oscillatory dynamics were observed depending on the size of the group and  
 271 enzyme concentrations. For  $N_r = 9$ , and  $E_0 = 500$  u/ml the whole group oscillated with a front spreading  
 272 from the centre of the array outwards and then contracting in from the edges (Fig. 7a). The length  
 273 scale of the array ( $23 \times 100 \mu\text{m} = 2.3$  mm) was small and a reaction-diffusion wave was not observed;  
 274 the acid diffused in from the edge quenching the high pH state before recovery of the central beads  
 275 could take place. For larger enzyme,  $E_0 = 600$  u/ml, and  $N_r = 11$  the central cells remained in the high  
 276 pH state while the outer cells oscillated (Fig. 7b). This is a mixed high pH-blinker state. A dual frequency  
 277 state was also observed as the number of rows was increased to  $N_r = 19$ , where the edge beads  
 278 oscillated with double the frequency of the centre beads (Fig. 7c).  
 279



280  
 281 Figure 7. Oscillatory dynamics of bead arrays with  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM and pH time traces show central bead  
 282 pH (thick line) and average pH of array (dotted line). (a) and (d) Blinker with  $E_0 = 500$  u/ml and  $N_r = 9$ ;  
 283 (b) and (e) mixed high pH-blinker state with  $E = 600$  u/ml and  $N_r = 11$ ; (c) and (f) dual frequency state  
 284  $E_0 = 500$  u/ml and  $N_r = 19$ . Movies available at a) [link](#), b) [link](#) and c) [link](#).  
 285  
 286

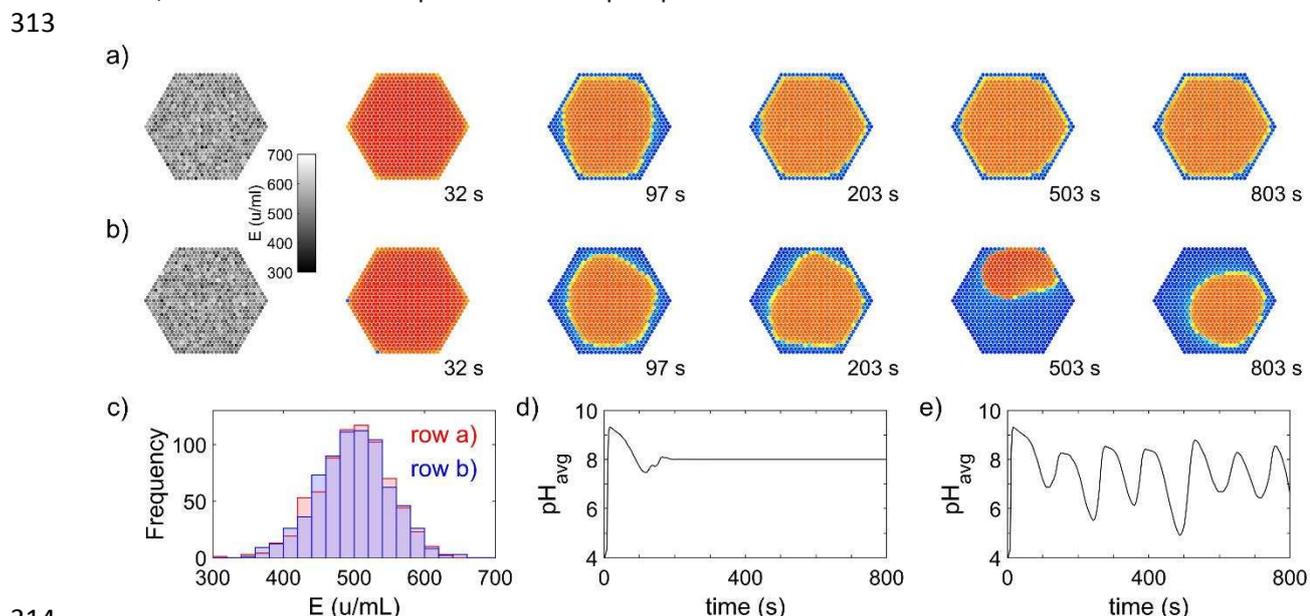
### 287 **3.3 Transitions with numbers of beads: heterogeneous distributions of enzyme**

288  
 289 The influence of heterogeneity in enzyme loading on these dynamical transitions was also  
 290 investigated with values of  $E$  selected randomly from a normal distribution. Multiple runs were  
 291 performed to estimate the probability of a high pH steady state ( $SS_H$ ), oscillatory (OSC) or low pH  
 292 steady state ( $SS_L$ ) for a given mean enzyme activity  $\mu_E$  and coefficient of variation,  $\sigma$ . The resulting  $\mu_E$ -  
 293  $N_r$  phase diagram was similar in form to Figure 3, even with  $\sigma = 30\%$  (Fig. 8a). The sharp transitions  
 294 with  $N_r$  were still obtained, resulting in a sigmoidal switch at  $\mu_E = 700$  u/ml and a transition to  
 295 oscillations at  $\mu_E = 500$  u/ml (Figure 8b, c). However, with  $\mu_E = 500$  u/ml, there was an increased  
 296 probability of the high pH steady state as  $N_r$  and  $\sigma$  were increased.  
 297



298  
 299 Figure 8. Switches in heterogeneous enzyme arrays with  $S_0 = 0.4$  mM,  $pH_0 = 4$  and  $\mu_E =$  mean enzyme  
 300 activity. (a) Phase diagram with  $\sigma = 30\%$  where each bar shows fraction of  $SS_H$  (orange),  $SS_L$  (blue) or  
 301 OSC (purple) obtained from multiple runs. (b) and (c) Probability of either  $SS_H$  or OSC (active, black  
 302 squares) and probability of  $SS_H$  (orange line) with (b)  $E = 500$  u/ml and (c)  $E = 700$  u/ml.

303  
 304 The spatial distribution of the enzyme played an important role in the selection of dynamical  
 305 behaviour;  $SS_H$  or OSC. In two separate runs with  $\mu_E = 500$  u/ml and  $\sigma = 10\%$ , an oscillatory state was  
 306 obtained with total enzyme of  $E_T = 3.6162 \times 10^5$  u/ml and a high pH steady state was obtained with  
 307 lower total enzyme  $E_T = 3.6004 \times 10^5$  u/ml. The formation of the steady state and an oscillatory state  
 308 are shown in Figure 9, as well as the spatial configuration of the enzyme concentration (greyscale) and  
 309 normal distribution of enzyme (Fig. 9c). Waves propagated asymmetrically across the domain in case  
 310 b, resulting in travelling structures that gave rise to aperiodic average pH-time traces. The time-  
 311 average pH over the array was 8 in the case of the steady state and less than that in the oscillatory  
 312 case; however individual spikes reached up to pH 9.



314  
 315 Figure 9. Dynamic behaviour in heterogeneous enzyme arrays with  $\mu_E = 500$  u/ml,  $\sigma = 10\%$  and  $S_0 = 0.4$   
 316 mM and  $N_r = 15$ . First image shows spatial enzyme distribution and subsequent evolution of the array  
 317 is shown in a series of images where blue = low pH, orange = high pH. (a) Steady state and (b)  
 318 oscillations. (c) Normal distribution of enzyme loading; (d) and (e) average pH in the array in time for  
 319 (a) and (b) respectively. Movie for (b) available at [link](#).

321

## 322 4. Discussion

323 Here we examined transitions in the behaviour of groups of enzyme-loaded microparticles  
324 (beads) that displayed feedback and exchanged chemicals with a common surround via passive  
325 diffusion. Our coarse grid approach with the two-variable model allowed us to explore parameter  
326 space and identify some generic features that may aid in the implementation of synthetic quorum  
327 sensing in applications. The simulations were inspired by quorum sensing in bacteria and other single  
328 celled organisms and, although clearly an oversimplification, may provide some insight to some of the  
329 dynamic behaviours observed in growing colonies of microorganisms.

330 The term quorum sensing refers to a population-wide change in behaviour above a threshold  
331 number or density of cells [1, 3]. In line with other work, we considered quorum sensing transitions in  
332 a uniform layer of cells with constant local density but growing in size [16]. However, the spatial  
333 proximity of cells within a colony may play a role in such transitions, as well as other processes that  
334 influence the mass transfer such as advection. This has led to the introduction of the terms “diffusion  
335 sensing” and later “efficiency sensing” in order to take into account these factors [36]. Simulations  
336 were performed with heterogeneities in enzyme loading which likely play a similar role to clustering  
337 effects although this warrants further investigation. Nevertheless, we found that the sharp changes in  
338 state with increasing group size were robust.

339 Quorum sensing in cells involves the production and release of small diffusible molecules into  
340 the extracellular solution. Changes in state are generally associated with a build-up of autoinducer in  
341 the surrounding solution to some threshold level or a decrease in the loss rate of autoinducer from  
342 cells by diffusion [8, 16]. One or more autoinducers may be involved in a complex network of reactions.  
343 For example, *Dictyostelium* cells use the molecules PSF and cAMP as intercellular signals [37]. PSF  
344 accumulates in the extracellular solution with increasing cell density. When PSF reaches a threshold  
345 level and food is in short supply, this glycoprotein initiates a series of processes resulting in activation  
346 of the enzyme required for cAMP synthesis. The cAMP catalyses its own production and is emitted in  
347 pulses, propagating as waves through the colony that direct the motion of cells.

348 Here, a well characterised enzyme-catalysed reaction was selected that is both present in  
349 microorganisms and accessible in vitro: the urea-urease reaction [22]. In a simple analogy to a  
350 biological quorum sensing circuit, the enzyme, urease, was confined to a microparticle and cell-to-cell  
351 communication was achieved through diffusion of acid and substrate. The enzyme reaction raised the  
352 pH and feedback occurred as an increase in pH led to an increase in rate. An individual bead was  
353 unable to raise the pH sufficiently to overcome the influx of acid from the surrounding solution.  
354 However, in a group of beads there was a lower fraction of beads in contact with acid at the edge of  
355 the array and the pH increased in both the beads and the adjacent solution cells to some threshold  
356 level, initiating autocatalysis.

357 The signal-response curves obtained here are switch-like in the sense that there is a change  
358 from a low pH “off” state to a high pH “on” state with increases in group size. The nature of the switch  
359 was found to depend upon the enzyme concentration of the beads: at high enzyme a sigmoidal switch  
360 (buzzer) was obtained; at intermediate enzyme oscillations were observed (blinker) and at low enzyme  
361 a bistable (toggle) switch resulted. These are all important dynamical responses that arise in cellular  
362 systems [29] and the results have some interesting implications for growing colonies of micro-  
363 organisms.

364 If cells contain sufficient enzyme, then a sharp transition to a high autoinducer “on” state is  
365 obtained with increasing group size. This switch, the buzzer, is not robust as small changes in  
366 parameters in the vicinity of the transition point result in collapse of the behaviour, however the cells  
367 are producing large amounts of enzyme. If the cells contain intermediate amounts of enzyme, an  
368 increase in the group size results in an oscillating state, a blinker. The amount of autoinducer produced  
369 in time is lower than for the sigmoidal switch, but conversion is still achieved, and pulses of  
370 autoinducer can be used to direct the motion of cells.

371 For low enzyme concentrations, the system displays a bistable toggle switch with increasing  
372 group size. This is useful, since the cells are producing small amounts of enzyme but the switch is  
373 robust to noise under these conditions. Once the transition to the “on” state is made, small changes  
374 in group size or substrate concentration do not lead to a return to the low autoinducer state.

375 Although it is not implicated in quorum sensing, the enzyme urease is a virulence factor  
376 exploited by bacteria such as *Helicobacter pylori* and *Proteus mirabilis* in the non-buffered  
377 environment of the stomach or urinary tract. The increase in pH associated with the reaction is  
378 believed to protect *H. pylori* against the acidic environment of stomach [38]. *P. mirabilis* forms rafts –  
379 small groups of cells linked together - that allow the bacteria to rapidly colonise catheters. Cells  
380 produce a particularly potent urease that drives an increase of urine pH and precipitation of  
381 phosphates leading to the formation of kidney stones and catheter encrustations [28]. We have shown  
382 how sharp switches in pH can be obtained when a group reaches a critical size. There may be gradients  
383 in pH in time and space but with feedback the maximum pH obtained locally can result in sufficiently  
384 high values to trigger rapid biomineralisation, even if the average pH of the whole system is lower. It  
385 would be of interest to couple the enzyme processes included here with cell motion in order to better  
386 understand how feedback through pH may influence pathogenic behaviour [39].

387 The main reason for our choice of urease was that the system reported here is implementable  
388 in experiments. Urease has been used in sensing, crack repair (by inducing calcium carbonate  
389 precipitation) [40] and polymer synthesis [24] and has been immobilised on numerous solid supports  
390 including alginate [41]. In earlier work, it was demonstrated how features such as waves and  
391 oscillations obtained in the two-variable urea-urease model are also possible in the full model  
392 including all chemical processes and enzyme inhibition, albeit over a smaller region of parameter  
393 space [32, 42]. Propagating waves of pH and bistable switches have been obtained in the gel beads,  
394 but oscillations were not observed, probably because a key requirement is the differential transport  
395 ( $D_H > D_S$ ) of acid and substrate, and diffusion constants for acid in gels may be lower than for dilute  
396 solutions [43]. Evidence of collective behaviour has not yet been reported in urease beads.

397 The cross-shaped phase diagram is a universal map, spanning many different mechanisms of  
398 autocatalysis, that has been used to find oscillations and patterns in chemical systems [44]. The same  
399 general topology was obtained here in enzyme-substrate and enzyme-group size phase space. The  
400 feedback mechanism exploited involves coupling the bell-shaped rate–pH curve with production of an  
401 acid or base. Originally proposed in simulations with an esterase [45], this method is widely applicable  
402 since most enzymes display similar rate–pH curves [46]. It seems likely that a similar diagram will be  
403 obtained for other enzyme-catalysed reactions, as well as other autocatalytic processes.

404 Synthetic quorum sensing might be exploited in biotechnology to induce a sharp change in  
405 state in response to a change in a density- or group size in, for example, targeted drug delivery.  
406 Collective behaviour has been extensively investigated in inorganic catalytic particles and more  
407 complex behaviours than reported here are possible [47, 48]. However, for applications in medicine  
408 biocompatible feedback is required. Feedback itself is widely used for complex information processing  
409 in biological cells. There is increasing interest in the design of bio-compatible reaction networks  
410 involving organic molecules [49, 50], peptides, enzymes [51, 52] and even DNA [53, 54] that might be  
411 used to generate bio-inspired emergent behaviour in synthetic systems [55]. Enzyme-loaded  
412 microparticles or vesicles remain the best candidates for obtaining collective behaviour inspired by  
413 bacteria such as quorum sensing.

414

## 415 5. Conclusions

416 We have demonstrated in reaction-diffusion simulations how three different transitions can  
417 be achieved with increasing numbers of enzyme-loaded microparticles: a sigmoidal buzzer, an  
418 oscillatory blinker and bistable toggle switch. The simulations exploited the use of a single enzyme,  
419 urease, found in numerous plants and microorganisms, that raises the pH of the medium and  
420 experimental implementation of the results is feasible. The combination of cell-to-cell communication

421 and feedback might be exploited to generate more complex collective behaviours and spatial  
422 organisation in enzyme catalytic particles for bioinspired dynamic materials or devices.

423

#### 424 [Data accessibility](#)

425 Supplementary information, movies and code are available at the University of Sheffield repository  
426 ORDA: 10.15131/shef.data.5357494; 10.15131/shef.data.5357503 and 10.15131/shef.data.5357506.

#### 427 [Authors' contributions](#)

428 TB and AFT conceived the study, TB wrote the code and collected the data, AFT and TB performed  
429 data analysis and wrote the manuscript.

#### 430 [Competing interests](#)

431 We declare that we have no competing interests.

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435

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