**BACK TO THE FUTURE *(LAMS 2020 ENTRY S/N: 107; FIRST PLACE)*** *Submission by* EKULIDE, Gideon*; 500L medical student, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Medical School, Nnewi, Nigeria)*

*(A speech delivered on December 3, 2030 at the World Leaders’ Conference, Sydney, Australia by Dr. Ekulide, Gideon.)*

Good afternoon, distinguished delegates.

It is said that bad students fail history. The import of this aphorism may not be grasped at face value or its relevance appreciated after a cursory glance. It takes a painstaking dedication to unmask the truth behind this terse string of words. Indeed, history is a go-to repertoire of knowledge and mistakes. Our present was shaped by history and the future is to a large extent dependent on how well we understood our lessons in history.

About a decade ago, the world, just fresh from the annual ritual of the end-of-the-year celebrations to usher in a new year, was unprepared for the rude shock that awaited them. While we made resolutions and plans for the New Year, a virus armed with an unshaken resolve ravaged the inhabitants of the Orient. By February of that year, Western Europe was reeling from the human devastation wreaked by this crown-shaped micro-monster. It was not long before the virus came knocking on doors of the remaining continents—a pandemic had begun! Human-to-human interactions became a taboo and man became a prisoner in his own home. Economies dipped, businesses closed and those who subsisted from hand to mouth were stung hard by the harsh reality of seeing their meagre sources of subsistence disappear. Looking back, what were the things we did wrong? The human devastation occasioned by the pandemic was monumental. Why? It is estimated that we may record yet another pandemic in the next five years. What must be done to forestall a recurrence?

The coronavirus pandemic was largely “successful” because of the absence of what I will call a Pandemic Signaling Platform (PSP). This is a framework consisting of Pandemic Signalers (PSs) serving the function of detecting outbreaks in any part of the world and alerting the comity of nations about the presence of an existential threat. Establishing Pandemic Signalers in every country of the world will go the distance in preventing the spread of infectious diseases from any location. Governments and their health agencies will receive real-time information and progress reports regarding outbreaks in any part of the planet through this framework. This will then serve as a compass to guide their containment and mitigatory actions based on proximity to the area. For example, a country with an outbreak can initiate an automatic lockdown of the location of such an outbreak while countries closer to the focus can decide to either close its borders or place travel restrictions to the “focus country”. On the other hand, farther countries can also place travel restrictions to the focus country and with the guidance of real-time information from the focus country check the migration of infected individuals—who serve as vehicles for spread—early enough.

Second, establishing isolation settlements in every cosmopolitan and urban centre is a visionary and long-term approach to solving the problem of containment. An isolation settlement differs from an isolation centre in that it is not make-shift. During the coronavirus pandemic, countries at the eleventh hour began the conversion of public buildings and spaces to isolation centres. Stadia, schools and universities were converted to make-shift isolation centres all in a bid to contain a rabid virus hell-bent on decimating mankind. With isolation settlements, the problem of space is solved. If, for instance, there is a sudden outbreak, with isolation settlements well-equipped and on stand-by, containment will not problematic. You may wonder, *“…but pandemics don’t happen every day. Why waste scarce resources on building such settlements?”* Truth is, the pros outweigh the cons. The costs of building and equipping isolation settlements are far less than the human and economic costs of a devastating pandemic. These isolation settlements can be affiliated to large hospitals who will run and maintain them. That way, they are put to good use instead of leaving them to rot from inactivity.

Furthermore, a shortage of health workers was largely evident during the coronavirus pandemic. Doctors, nurses and other health workers were worked to the bones while trying to stem the tide of a debilitating pandemic. Unfortunately, a lot of them lost their lives while trying to save others. This shortage (and unfortunate loss) can be solved by training paramedical personnel whose job will be solely to contact trace, isolate and partially treat infected individuals. Medical students should also be included in such training early enough in their stay in medical school. This will bring enough hands to the fight and reduce the stress placed on health workers due to a shortage of personnel. Note that these individuals are not replacing doctors or other health workers. No. They are meant to buffer any form of stress that will be occasioned by a debilitating outbreak.

The role of robotics cannot be over-emphasized. Robots acting as surrogate humans will reduce the spread of an outbreak. Using robots in bars, pubs, hotels will to a large extent reduce the spread of diseases gotten through human-to-human contact. Robots have the advantage of being immune to diseases since they do not possess the human anatomy while being able to carry out certain activities befitting to humans. They can be employed by courier and parcel delivery companies, utilized at airports and even used as auxiliaries in the fight against infectious diseases. Quite honestly, this comes at the cost of displacing humans out of certain jobs. But I strongly believe that the long-term advantages of robotics will outweigh the temporary discomfort of unemployment. Therefore, as leaders, it behooves us to sacrifice present comfort for the assurance of a secured future.

Lastly, in the words of Soren Kierkegaard, *“life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards”*. Looking **back**, we must acknowledge the relevance of history **to the future**—a future which could be a repetition of historical mistakes or one built on its lessons.

Thank you all.