

Human Genome Project makes its mark in Germany

Munich News of the draft human genome sequence has not been slow to reach the German public. According to a survey carried out last month, 84% of Germans say that they are aware of the achievement, a surprisingly high proportion for a country in which the circulation of news about research tends to be slow, and public understanding of science is often said to be low.

The imagination of many Germans seems to have been fired by a development that many believe will be epoch-making. More than half of those who know about the completion of the project said that it would be "more significant than the first landing on the Moon".

Many Germans remain sceptical. Only a third were optimistic about the project's potential benefits, whereas 44% were afraid of the consequences. But in eastern Germany, more expressed hope (39%) than fear (37%).

Global warming concerns over melting North Pole

London The icecap at the North Pole is melting, says a scientist who found a mile-wide stretch of open ocean on a recent trip there. James McCarthy, director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University and co-chair of a working group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, told *The New York Times* he had expected to find an icecap of between six and nine feet thick. But on a trip to the pole on a Russian ice-breaker, the *Yamal*, earlier in August, he found only a thin crust of ice.

Although the discovery is being seen as further evidence of the existence of global warming, Peter Wadhams, reader in polar studies at Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge, says it is common to find open water at the North Pole in summer. But he also says there was an unusually large amount of open water this year — part of a recorded thinning and retreating of sea ice. "Mean ice thickness in late summer is now 40% less than it was 20–30 years ago," he says.

Siena banks on local science research

Siena, Italy The world's oldest banking institution — Monte dei Paschi di Siena, founded in 1472 — is setting up a fund to support local research. The fund, due to be launched next year with an annual budget of 10 billion lire (\$10.4 million), will be administered by the bank's charitable foundation.

Rino Rappuoli, director of IRIS, a



Hot tip: forget the races, Siena is backing science.

vaccine-development company owned by California-based biotechnology company Chiron, and a member of the foundation's scientific advisory committee, says the money will probably be used to extend Siena's strong base in medical research. His committee has also suggested that it should fund the development of genetic tests on new vine stock, an important part of the local economy.

Genetic animal experiments on the rise in Britain

London The number of animals used for genetic experiments in the United Kingdom rose by 14% to 512,000 last year — fuelling speculation that a 25-year decline in the use of animals in research is ending. The figures, released by the Home Office last week, drew a warning from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) that the use of genetically engineered animals might be getting out of control.

The RSPCA wants more scrutiny of these experiments. But researchers are already complaining that the administrative burden is too great (*Nature* 404, 529–530 & 405, 725; 2000). The Home Office is reviewing the system of processing applications for research projects.

Putin to head Russian science policy council

Moscow Russian president Vladimir Putin is to head a new council dealing with science policy. His announcement came at the end of a meeting last week with members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which addressed issues ranging from staffing problems to the Internet's impact on Russian science.

Arguing for a more positive attitude to exploiting scientific discoveries, Putin said that "little has changed since the times when inventions were made in Russia but applications for them were found elsewhere". He also admitted that more government support for basic research was needed,

adding that the improvement over the past 18 months was not enough.

MediaLabEurope ready to 'reinvent the future'

Dublin MediaLabEurope — a research and education centre established in Dublin, Ireland, by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Media Lab — was officially opened at a ceremony last month (see *Nature* 401, 836; 1999). Speaking at the two-day event, Bertie Ahern, the Irish prime minister, said that the laboratory's mission is to "reinvent the future".

The lab aims to train researchers, inventors and artists, in Ireland and throughout Europe, in new communications and multimedia technology. The Irish government has provided IR£28 million (US\$32.3 million) in initial funding to support the venture, as well as a laboratory building in central Dublin at the site of a former brewery.

IBM turns its attention to life sciences

Washington The computer giant IBM is investing \$100 million to develop computational biology tools, and is expanding its efforts in biology by forming a life sciences division. Both moves are based on the company's estimate that the market for information technology in the life sciences will rise from \$3.5 billion today to more than \$9 billion by 2003.

The company predicts that much of the need for computing in biology will be driven by the Human Genome Project, proteomics projects and the pharmaceutical research that are likely to spin off from both. Last December, IBM committed \$100 million to building a supercomputer designed to help scientists understand the mechanisms behind protein folding (see *Nature* 402, 705; 1999).

Brain-dead organ donors 'should be anaesthetized'

London Anaesthetic should be routinely given to brain-dead organ donors, according to an editorial in *Anaesthesia*, the journal of Britain's Royal College of Anaesthetists. Whether or not brainstem-dead patients experience pain when organs are removed remains a controversial issue among anaesthetists.

Patients are already given muscle-paralysing drugs to prevent involuntary responses to surgery, but anaesthesia is not required, and guidelines issued last year by the Intensive Care Society stated that this was not necessary. The founder of the British Organ Donor Society has criticized the journal's comments as unsettling for relatives of the patients involved.