

Companies join forces to crack the human proteome

Washington Ambitious plans to compile a catalogue of all human proteins and analyse their interactions were unveiled this week.

Myriad Genetics of Salt Lake City, Utah, is forming a \$185 million collaboration with software company Oracle and electronics corporation Hitachi to characterize the human proteome over the next three years. They hope to produce a proprietary database with "all human protein interactions, all biochemical pathways and a comprehensive catalogue of purified proteins".

Structural biologists will use data on protein structure to identify regions within a protein that are therapeutically important. The partners hope that this information will then play an important role in drug design.

Europe faces up to fears of foot-and-mouth outbreak

London The number of cases of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain looked set to exceed 1,000 this week, as fears mounted that smaller outbreaks in nearby European countries may also prove difficult to control.

Dutch vets had confirmed ten cases by 2 April. The first seven were on farms relatively close to each other, but three subsequent outbreaks occurred on farms 30 kilometres away from the original cases. Dutch farmers now fear that the government programme of vaccination and slaughter may have failed to contain the virus.

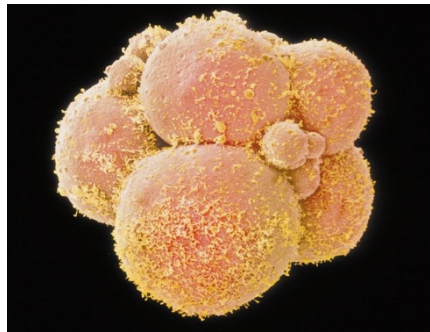
In Britain, pressure from farmers has forced Prime Minister Tony Blair to postpone local elections — and an expected general election — from 3 May. The number of cases is still increasing exponentially, as predicted by three epidemiological studies presented last week (see *Nature* 410, 501; 2001).

Canadian panel backs stem-cell research

Ottawa Canadian scientists should have access to public money for research on stem cells and their derivation from human embryos and fetal tissue, an advisory panel told the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) last week.

Lack of funding guidelines for stem-cell research led the CIHR — the country's main biomedical research agency — to set up a 10-member panel of scientists, bioethicists and policy experts to look into the issue. Janet Rossant, a developmental geneticist at the University of Toronto, is chairing the group.

The panel is asking scientists and members of the public to comment on its draft report, which recommends that the CIHR should fund research on stem cells derived from fetal



Medical potential: an eight-cell human embryo.

tissue and embryos left over from fertility treatments, but not from embryos created specifically for the purpose of providing stem cells. It proposes a moratorium on funding for work that involves mixing human stem cells with animal embryos.

The panel's final recommendations are due in June. Any move by the CIHR to fund stem-cell research might influence the debate in the United States, where some scientists fear that President George W. Bush will overturn a decision to allow limited funding for such work.

► <http://www.cihr.ca>

Japanese research institute gets clean bill of health

Tokyo One of Japan's leading institutes for research into infectious disease is free to continue its work after a court rejected a claim that it posed a threat to public health.

When the National Institute of Infectious Diseases (NIID) relocated to central Tokyo in 1989, a court action was brought against it by local residents concerned that the pathogens studied by the institute could escape through the air-conditioning or in waste water. Teams of scientists from the United States and Britain were brought in by the NIID and the residents, respectively, to support their arguments during the trial.

A Tokyo court ruled last week that the scientific evidence did not support the residents' case. But the battle is not over — the residents have said they will appeal.

► <http://www.nih.go.jp/niid/index-e.html>

France to address gender inequality

Paris The lack of women in top jobs in French science is to be investigated by the CNRS, France's national research agency.

Although more than 40% of CNRS staff are women, only a small number reach the most senior posts. Geneviève Berger, the agency's director-general, announced plans last week to set up a committee to research the causes of the gender inequality.

The CNRS committee complements the French research ministry's recent plans for a package of seven initiatives to promote

women in science, including a new 'women, science and technology' unit. This would aim to ensure that women get fair treatment when research policy is being implemented.

AIDS vaccine gets off to a promising start

San Francisco An AIDS vaccine has shown promising signs in experiments with monkeys, researchers at pharmaceutical company Merck announced this week.

The vaccine consists of an inactivated cold virus into which the gene for the outer shell of HIV has been inserted. When injected into monkeys, the virus delivers the gene to the immune system, teaching it to recognize and attack HIV. Three monkeys that received the vaccine are still healthy eight months after being injected with a highly virulent form of HIV. Six out of eight control monkeys deprived of the vaccine have died.

The vaccine will not prevent HIV infection, but it might prolong the lives of people with HIV, without the need for drugs. Merck estimates that at least six years of clinical testing will be necessary before the vaccine is ready for widespread use.

Double whammy for beleaguered lab

London The troubled UK drug-testing lab Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS) suffered a double blow last week. Pharmaceutical company British Biotech announced it would terminate its remaining HLS contracts just days after HLS was forced off the main London Stock Exchange.

All companies on the London exchange must use at least two independent brokers to trade shares. But both of HLS's brokers stopped trading its shares last week after one, Winterflood Securities, suffered demonstrations outside its London offices.

British Biotech decided last June not to place new contracts with HLS, but recent pressure from activists led it to stop all HLS work at once. Protesters who demonstrated outside the company's Oxford office and harassed British Biotech staff now say they will target other HLS clients, such as Novartis, Roche and Bayer.



Dogged determination: continuing protests are causing significant problems for HLS.