

Epidemiologists warn of widespread arsenic problem in India

New Delhi The arsenic contamination of well water on the Indian subcontinent could affect much greater numbers of people than had previously been thought, a study suggests.

Arsenic was first spotted in well water in the 1980s on the Bengal Delta, an area shared by India and Bangladesh that is the coastal flood plain of several rivers including the Ganges. But Dipankar Chakraborti, an epidemiologist at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, has now confirmed reports of arsenic poisoning in the Indian state of Bihar, 500 kilometres west of the delta (D. Chakraborti *et al. Environmental Health Perspectives* doi:10.1289/ehp.5966; 2003).

Chakraborti realized that there might be a problem after hearing of a spate of cancer deaths and skin lesions in the area, both of which are associated with the chronic intake of arsenic. The study raises fears that arsenic-laden aquifers could cover much of the Ganges basin, which stretches beneath the foothills of the Himalayas from New Delhi to the Bay of Bengal.



Health problems: well water contaminated with arsenic can cause skin lesions and cancer.

Göttingen rapped by German funding agency

Munich The University of Göttingen has been accused of ignoring a request to set up an independent inquiry into allegations of scientific misconduct.

A letter to the university from the DFG, Germany's main grant-giving agency and ethical guardian for universities, was leaked last week to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper. In the letter, the DFG complains that the university has ignored a request from the agency's ombudsman to set up an investigation into a paper on the skin disorder neurodermatitis. The study by V. Schettler *et al. (Kidney and Blood Pressure Research* 24, 213–440; 2001) claimed clinical success for a new immunological treatment for the disorder.

The university's medical faculty investigated the study last year after questions were raised about the data involved. But the DFG said that the faculty's conclusion — that misconduct could not be ruled out and that a retraction was “expected” — was too mild.

The University of Göttingen has recently been criticized for its slow handling of a high-profile study of a cancer vaccine published in *Nature Medicine* (see *Nature* 420, 258; 2002).

Japan matches price of German collider

Tokyo Japanese physicists have unveiled the most detailed cost estimates yet of their version of a next-generation electron–positron collider.

The Japanese Electron–Positron Linear Collider Project calls for the construction of a 30-kilometre-long pair of linear accelerators to smash electrons and positrons together at energies of 500 GeV. Depending on the version of the collider to be built, its cost will be between US\$2.5 billion and US\$4.2 billion, Japanese researchers announced on 12 February.

This puts the project's cost in line with a rival German proposal, known as TESLA, estimated at US\$3.7 billion. The high-energy collisions are needed to illuminate the behaviour of particles and forces at extremely high energies and over very small distance scales.

► <http://www-jlc.kek.jp>
 ► <http://tesla.desy.de>

Europe uproots patent for DuPont's oil-rich maize

Munich A patent on a variety of maize with a high yield of oil has been revoked by the European Patent Office, following challenges by the Mexican government, Greenpeace and Misereor, an overseas-development agency run by the German Catholic Church.

The maize was developed by the chemical and agricultural company DuPont, based in Wilmington, Delaware. Pollen was exposed to a chemical mutagen and then cross-pollinated with normal maize. The resulting plants were then screened for high oil yields — the patent was awarded to a variety with an unusually high proportion of oleic acid, the predominant oil in olive oil.

Opponents argued that the patent was not valid because DuPont's techniques are widely used, and because maize with high yields of oil have been developed through normal plant-breeding programmes. The Mexican government also objected, although the patent would have had no legal grounds in the country. A spokesperson for the patent office says that farmers would still have been able to use existing high-yield crops.

Gravitational waves remain out of reach

Denver An ambitious US project to detect gravitational waves presented its first results this week at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting in Denver, Colorado. The data were collected over 17 days in September by the two facilities of the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory. No waves were seen, but the measurements will help astronomers predict the power and frequency of the high-energy events that are thought to create detectable gravitational waves.

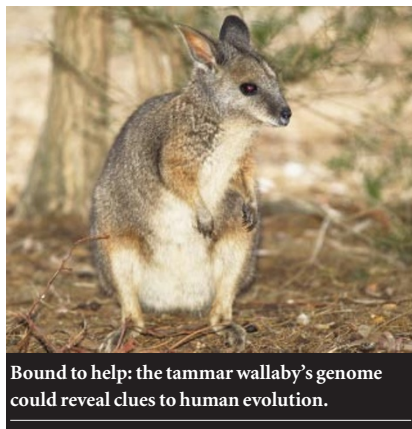
The observatories, based in Livingston, Louisiana, and Hanford, Washington, have been trying to reduce noise picked up by their detectors (see *Nature* 417, 482–484; 2002), and it is unclear whether the current designs will be able to detect gravitational waves. Plans for an upgrade costing US\$100 million to US\$150 million were unveiled this week.

Wallaby hops into running for genome sequence

Sydney A rabbit-sized kangaroo called the tammar wallaby (*Macropus eugenii*) is to enter the competition for time and money at US gene-sequencing centres. If successful, it will join the chimpanzee and honeybee in the queue of organisms waiting to have their genomes read letter by letter.

Geneticist Jenny Graves of the Australian National University in Canberra, who is spearheading the kangaroo campaign, says that in terms of our evolution the kangaroo lies between close cousins such as the mouse and more distant relatives such as birds and fish. As such, it could generate new insights into how the human genome evolved. Graves and others have used kangaroo genetics to show how human sex chromosomes evolved from standard chromosomes, for example.

The bid was dispatched in time to meet the 10 February deadline set by the US National Human Genome Research Institute. But competition is stiff: the cat, pig and rhesus monkey are all expected to be in the running.



Bound to help: the tammar wallaby's genome could reveal clues to human evolution.