

Libya suggests it will drop death penalty for Bulgarian nurses

London Five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who were sentenced to death by a Libyan court in May, for allegedly infecting 400 children with HIV, may be spared. After intense pressure by the international community, including protests by scientists, the son of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi said last week that the government would commute the sentences.

“I rule out the possibility of executing the Bulgarian defendants,” Seif al-Islam Gaddafi told The Associated Press. He added that Libya, which is seeking rehabilitation by the international community after decades of ostracism, will reconsider its use of capital punishment so that it will apply only in “limited, narrow cases”. Seif Gaddafi has no official government position, but often speaks on behalf of his father.

The health workers have been in prison for five years (see *Nature* 430, 277; 2004), even though scientists say that many of the children were infected as early as 1994, long before the workers arrived in Libya. The evidence suggests that the infections came from another patient via dirty syringes.

Bush names secretaries for energy and health

Washington Candidates have been selected to run the US departments of energy and health. On 10 December, President George W. Bush nominated Samuel Bodman, deputy secretary of the commerce department, as the next energy secretary. And on 13 December he selected Mike Leavitt, head of the Environmental Protection Agency, to lead the health department.

Touted by Bush as “a problem solver”, Bodman, a former chemical engineer, would oversee much of US physics research and the nuclear-weapons programme. If confirmed by the Senate, he will succeed Spencer Abraham, who stepped down last month.



In the frame: President Bush nominates Samuel Bodman (left) as energy secretary.

Gates cash lifts hope of cheaper malaria drug

San Francisco Research into an effective antimalarial drug received a boost on 13 December with the announcement of a US\$43-million grant from the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The grant will support the development of a synthetic form of artemisinin, the drug of choice for treating malaria. Artemisinin is derived from a plant (right) grown in China and Vietnam. Increasing demand has far outstripped supply, leading to a crisis in countries that have made treatment with the drug part of a national strategy (see *Nature* 432, 259; 2004).

The new funding will go to the Institute for OneWorld Health in San Francisco, a non-profit drug company, which will work in partnership with Amyris Biotechnologies and chemical engineer Jay Keasling of the University of California, Berkeley. Keasling is developing a method for turning genetically modified bacteria



into artemisinin factories (see *Nature Biotechnol.* 21, 796–802; 2003).

A spokesperson for the Institute for OneWorld Health said that the process should bring down the price of the drug from a prohibitive \$2.40 per adult course to less than \$1.

Leavitt, a former governor of Utah, would replace Tommy Thompson, who resigned on 3 December. He would be responsible for all US biomedical research and public-health agencies, including the National Institutes of Health.

US company buys into China's biotech market

Washington US biotech firm Invitrogen made a big move into China last week with the US\$8-million purchase of Shanghai-based Bio Asia, a major reagent manufacturer and distributor. The purchase was announced just days before World Trade Organization (WTO) guidelines opened the Chinese biotech industry to foreign-owned companies.

Until the change in the WTO's rules, “the playing field was heavily stacked in favour of local companies”, says Ian Chapman-Banks, Invitrogen's Asia Pacific marketing director. “We were at the mercy of our distributors.”

Usually reagents are distributed by local companies, often causing delays and frustration among Chinese researchers, says Chapman-Banks. But over the next two years, distribution should be shortened to a matter of days, he says.

Europe's biology club gives Iceland a warm welcome

London On New Year's day, Iceland will become the eighteenth state to join the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). EMBL, which has its main laboratory in Heidelberg, Germany, provides shared facilities and expertise that encourages international collaboration between its 1,300 staff members.

Despite its small population, Iceland has made “significant contributions in the field of molecular-biology genetics”, says Fotis Kafatos, EMBL's director-general.

“Since the mid 1980s Iceland has invested quite considerably in biotechnology,” says Thorgerdur Katrín Gunnarsdóttir, Iceland's science minister. For example, Icelandic company deCODE Genetics has combined the country's unusually detailed genealogical records with DNA sequence data to hunt for disease-related genes in the population.

Google finds itself in court in trademark row

Washington The American Chemical Society (ACS) has sued search-engine company Google in a US district court for trademark infringement and unfair competition.

The Washington-based ACS has been selling a search engine and database for chemistry-related data called SciFinder Scholar since 1998. It was indignant last month when Google, based in Mountain View, California, introduced a free scientific search engine called Google Scholar (see *Nature* 432, 423; 2004).

The ACS says that scientists often shorten the name of its research tool to ‘Scholar’, so there could be confusion with Google's product. Google has said that it will continue to use the name, but has not formally replied to the complaint.

“We feel we have no choice but to do this,” says Flint Lewis, general counsel for the ACS. “We are protecting the reputation and goodwill of a service that's been around for six years, and data that we've built up for 90 years.”

♦ <http://scholar.google.com>

♦ <http://www.cas.org/SCIFINDER/SCHOLAR>