



Baghdad, February 2007: Iraqi civilians are still in danger from car bombs in their neighbourhoods.

Roberts and others question Spagat's methods. But the issue could be checked using the raw data. If main-street bias exists, says Spagat, then death rates will fall as the interviews move away from the main street.

The raw data may also help address a fear that some researchers are expressing off the record: that the Iraqi interviewers might have inflated their results for political reasons. That could show up in unusual patterns within the data.

Roberts and Burnham say they have complete confidence in the Iraqi interviewers, after working with them directly for the 2004 study. And supporters say that criticisms should not detract from the fact that the Iraqi team managed to produce a survey under extremely difficult circumstances. Security threats forced the team to change travel plans and at one point to consider cancelling the survey altogether. Since its completion, one interviewer has been killed and another has left Baghdad, although it is not known whether either case is linked to their involvement in the survey. Either way, the continuing violence in the country is enough for the remaining interviewers to say that they are not willing to repeat the exercise. ■

Jim Giles



CHIMPS MAKE SPEARS TO CATCH DINNER

Wooden weapons are a first in animal kingdom.

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Q&A: Ronald Plasterk

Molecular geneticist Ronald Plasterk is one of the Netherlands' most highly cited researchers, publishing regularly in top journals in fashionable research fields such as regulation of gene expression by inhibitory RNAs. A lifelong member of the centre-left Labour party, he was last month named minister of research and universities in the country's new coalition government. He talked to **Alison Abbott** about how he ended up in this position.

How long have you been active in politics?

I was a member of the local council in Leiden in my student days, but then I went to do postdocs at the California Institute of Technology and the MRC Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge, UK. I started my family when I returned to the Netherlands, so I was only active in a marginal way. But in the past ten years or so I've been writing a weekly newspaper column and a commentary on TV, whose themes can be political. I also co-authored the Labour party's election platform.

now, but the people in my lab will not suffer. They will be taken care of by others in the institute.

What are the key issues for science in the Netherlands?

Europe is losing ground — compared with the United States, for example, from which we have a lot to learn in terms of meritocracy and researcher mobility. Holland is not so bad actually, but it could be, and needs to be, better. The academic system must become less hierarchical. The number of women in top science jobs is embarrassingly low, among the worst in Europe.

What will being research minister mean for your research?

I hate to say it, but it will mean the end of research for me. At a meeting only a few weeks ago I was exchanging scientific views with Nobel prizewinners — you can't step out of this level of research for four years and then hope to go back. It's not yet clear whether I will be able to retain my professorship.

How can scientific quality be improved?

Ask yourself why so many top physicists, including three Nobel prizewinners, ended up in Leiden 100 years ago? Or at the Cavendish laboratories in Cambridge? There is no blueprint for quality — top scientists will go where they can work best. We just need to provide sufficient funding to allow centres of excellence to emerge from within the community. And there is in fact more money for research foreseen in the government plan. ■

How do you feel about that?

I feel like Alice, stepping through the mirror into another, slightly unreal, world. I feel a little disconnected right

Ronald Plasterk believes that his political appointment spells the end of his research career.



R. CREMERS/HOLLANDESE HOOGTE