

Blakemore steps down from Medical Research Council

Neuroscientist Colin Blakemore is to give up his position as head of Britain's Medical Research Council (MRC) when his present contract expires this September.

Blakemore, who has been in post since 2003, told *Nature* that he has decided not to apply for a second term because the MRC will suffer a temporary loss of independence while new advisory boards are established to oversee UK health funding. The MRC distributes around £500 million (US\$960 million) of government money per year.

He departs with support from many of the researchers he funds. Over-optimistic spending had left the council short of money before Blakemore's arrival; he stabilized the funding situation and simplified grant procedures.

Sacked professor launches legal action to regain job

A professor dismissed by the University of Tokyo in Japan said on 2 March that he will take the university to court to demand his job back.

Kazunari Taira was fired in December after an investigation found "no reproducibility and no credibility" in four RNA papers from his lab. Also sacked was the researcher who had been in charge of the questioned experiments (see *Nature* 445, 12; 2007). Both deny involvement in misconduct.

The university criticized Taira for "neglect on appropriate supervision and lab management". But Taira argues that the case could put researchers off running labs and wants the university to restore his professorship and resume paying his salary. A spokesperson for the university says that it is considering its response to the lawsuit. Hearings for a provisional ruling will begin this month.

Nobel medal stolen from cabinet finds its way home

A Nobel medal swiped from the University of California, Berkeley, was returned to officials in a brief ceremony on 7 March.

The solid gold medallion, awarded to physicist Ernest Lawrence in 1939 for the invention of the cyclotron, was stolen from its display case at the end of February. It has an estimated monetary value of \$4,200.



NOBEL FOUNDATION

Scientists plan defence against asteroids

There's no doubt that a space rock slamming into Earth could cause substantial damage, but exactly what humans should do about the threat has not yet been decided. That's why scientists gathered for the Planetary Defense Conference in Washington DC on 5–8 March. Their aim was to compose a white paper on the subject — the first to be mandated by the US Congress.

Scientists at the conference said that it would cost about US\$1 billion to find at least 90% of the 20,000 estimated potential Earth-killers by 2020, and discussed how a space rock on a collision course might be deflected. Options range from using spacecraft as 'tugboats' to drag an object into a new orbit, to proposals that rely on nuclear detonations to knock a rock off target — similar to the strategy used against a comet in the 1998 film *Deep Impact* (pictured). The white paper will be published at www.aero.org/conferences/planetarydefense.



DREAMWORKS/PARAMOUNT/KOBAL COLLECTION

Authorities last week charged a biology student at the Berkeley campus with the theft. The 22-year-old worked at the university's Lawrence Hall of Science, where the medal was stored. He told police that he used a key to open the case, taking the 200-gram medal on a whim. Plans are now under way to house the medal in a more secure manner.

Wildlife agency accused of gagging scientists

The US Fish and Wildlife Service is fending off accusations of scientific censorship over a memo that outlines restrictions on who can say what about climate change, sea ice and polar bears.

The memo states that agency personnel travelling in northern countries should indicate a spokesperson and provide assurances that they "understand the Administration's position on these issues". A travel request for a non-spokesperson, included in

the memo as an example, said that the individual "will not be speaking on or responding to these issues".

Hugh Vickery, a spokesman at the Department of the Interior, the service's parent agency, says the memo was "badly worded" and really

only applied to discussions of policy. "It's a reminder not to get into areas where they shouldn't go." The polar bear has become political because is it being considered for a slot on the US endangered species list, thanks to the threat of melting sea ice.

The diaries of Darwin's wife debut online

For a unique glimpse into the family life of Charles Darwin, historians can now delve online into the diaries of his wife Emma.

Emma noted in pocket diaries details of her everyday life such as shopping costs, dinner parties and the illnesses of her children and husband. Spanning from 1824 — before the pair's marriage in 1839 — to 1896, the diaries belong to Darwin's great grandson and are looked after by the Darwin Archive at the University of Cambridge, UK. Images of the diaries' pages were made available to browse at <http://darwin-online.org.uk/EmmaDiaries.html> on 6 March.

The diaries record the visits of friends and scientists to the couple's house. For example, an entry in April 1856 says "Lyells came". A note in Darwin's own journal, dated a few weeks later, tells what happened after the visit by Charles Lyell and his wife: "Began by Lyells advice writing species sketch."

Correction

The News Feature 'The new face of the Arctic' (*Nature* 446, 133-135; 2007) mistakenly located the community of Tuktoyaktuk in Alaska. It is in Canada's Northwest Territories.