

US worker charged with stealing nuclear secrets

A labourer at a nuclear site in Tennessee has been charged with attempting to sell uranium-enrichment technology to France.

On 19 July, a federal grand jury indicted Roy Lynn Oakley for illegally possessing and attempting to transfer sensitive nuclear technology. Oakley was working to disassemble part of the K-25 gaseous-diffusion plant near the Oak Ridge National Laboratory that was used to enrich uranium for the nation's first nuclear weapons.

Oakley allegedly tried to sell sections of the plant's diffusion barriers to the French embassy in Washington DC. The embassy refused his offer; France has had gaseous-diffusion technology since the early 1950s.

This is the second recent security breach at a US weapons complex. Last autumn, classified documents from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico turned up in the trailer of a local drug dealer.

Oakley has pleaded not guilty.

Abbott drops suit against AIDS activist group

The drug company Abbott Laboratories back-pedaled in its battle against AIDS activists this week, agreeing to drop its lawsuit against the group Act Up-Paris.

Illinois-based Abbott has been increasingly criticized for its decision not to apply to sell new drugs in Thailand after the country began to issue 'compulsory licences' for key drugs. These would allow generic versions to be manufactured without the consent of the patent-holder (see *Nature* 448, 14; 2007). Abbott makes several AIDS drugs, including a heat-stable combination pill called Aluvia.

In April, Act Up-Paris organized an Internet protest that temporarily shut down Abbott's website. In May, the drug firm started legal proceedings against the group.

But on 22 July in Sydney, the International AIDS Society brokered a meeting between the two. Abbott has not changed its mind about applying to market drugs in Thailand.



Protesters demonstrate against Abbott's decision not to market new AIDS drugs in Thailand.

C. R. ARBOGAST/AP

Cosmology prizewinner sails off to work in virtual life

Last week, the day after astrophysicist Robert Knop decided to quit academia, he and 52 other scientists won the 2007 Gruber Cosmology Prize for discovering that the Universe's expansion is accelerating. "It gave me pause, but not much," says Knop. He is moving on to write code for Second Life, the alternative-reality computer program (right) run by the Linden Lab in San Francisco, California.



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In 1998, Knop was part of a team led by Saul Perlmutter of the University of California, Berkeley, that measured distant supernovae to gauge the Universe's growth. Researchers led by Brian Schmidt at the Australian National University in Canberra did the same. Knop later took a faculty position at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, but says he has been unable to get funding and thinks he wouldn't make tenure.

Perlmutter and Schmidt will each receive US\$125,000, with the rest of the \$500,000 prize being split between the co-authors of the seminal papers. "I'll take whatever they give me," says Knop.

German stem-cell law should change, says ethics council

Germany's advisory committee on medical ethics has recommended easing restrictions on human embryonic stem-cell research.

Current law, which has prompted bitter complaints from the research community, bars German scientists from working on stem-cell lines created after 2001. On 16 July, 14 of the National Ethics Council's 24 members approved a proposal to end the ban and establish mechanisms to approve research plans individually. The country's main funding agency, the DFG, made a similar recommendation last November, reversing its previous stance (see *Nature* 444, 253; 2006). More politicians are also coming out in favour of lifting the ban or shifting the cut-off date for cell lines to 2007.

Parliament is expected to consider revisions to the stem-cell law this autumn. Council member Horst Dreier thinks the federal research minister, Annette Schavan, will oppose ending the ban but may reset the cut-off date.

US publishing rate slows as Asia's rate grows

American institutions are publishing fewer research papers, and more papers are coming from Asia and Europe, a new US government study finds.

Overall, US scientists are authors of more articles than researchers in other countries. But production started to plateau in the late 1990s, according to a National Science Foundation survey that analysed scholarly output between 1988 and 2003 using article database citations.

China, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan made the biggest gains, publishing an average of 15.9% more articles per year between 1992 and 2003. Japan and the European Union upped their production by 3.1% and 2.8% per year, respectively, whereas US publications increased by just 0.6%.

American scientists are teaming up more often, the study adds, with more authors on each manuscript and more international collaborations.

Italy's research council boss departs at last

After a long and public struggle, the Italian government has finally ousted the unpopular president of the CNR, Italy's National Research Council, which runs some 100 institutes. On 20 July, Fabio Pistella, appointed by the previous right-wing government and criticized for his performance (see *Nature* 440, 264–265; 2006), was transferred to a non-scientific government agency.

The current centre-left government has changed the selection procedure for the heads of research agencies to avoid future political patronage. Under the new system, a short list of top scientists is proposed by an expert search committee, and the research minister must select from the list.

Pistella's removal follows several other high-profile departures, including those of Sergio Vetrella from the Italian Space Agency in October 2006 and Piero Benvenuti from the Italian National Institute for Astrophysics in April.

A temporary CNR commissioner is expected to be named by the end of this week.