

Axe-wielding professor fined for dumping ether

Daniel Storm, a pharmacology professor at the University of Washington in Seattle, just wanted to save a buck. After being told that it would cost his lab \$15,000 to dispose of five containers of ethyl ether properly, Storm broke the three made from metal open with an axe in June 2006 and clandestinely poured the contents of all five down the drain.

But faked disposal paperwork tipped off safety inspectors. On 28 August, in a federal court in Seattle, Storm was sentenced to 80 hours of community service and given a \$5,000 fine. Prosecutors said that his manoeuvres with the axe could have caused a spark and ignited the ethyl ether, which is extremely flammable both as a liquid and as a vapour.

Hybrid embryos win support from UK public

Most of the British public back the creation of hybrid embryos consisting of human DNA implanted into animal eggs, if it will benefit medical research, a public survey suggests. The survey of more than 2,000 people, carried out for the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA), found that 61% were in favour of the procedure if it might help scientists to understand diseases such as Parkinson's. A quarter of the respondents were against the technology.

As *Nature* went to press, the HFEA was widely expected to announce its approval of the technique at a meeting on 5 September to discuss the results of the public consultation. That should pave

the way for the granting of licences to two British research groups that applied in November last year for permission to create such embryos. For the latest details on the decision, visit www.nature.com/news.

Green light for centralized bank of patients' gene data

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced plans on 22 August to store patients' genetic and medical information in a central bank. The policy will mean that NIH-funded researchers must submit genome-wide scans for diseases into a database from 2008. Other researchers can access the data by request.

The NIH revised the policy from an earlier draft issued in August 2006, but made few changes despite public comments citing concerns over privacy. The database won't include information to identify patients, says Elizabeth Nabel, director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, who chaired the committee that created the policy.

Scientists who gather the gene data have exclusive publication rights for 12 months. The policy does not preclude commercialization of links between genes and diseases, but it urges researchers and companies to patent only new applications, such as diagnostic tests.

Space-lab staff file lawsuit to protect their privacy

Twenty-eight scientists at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) near Pasadena, California, have filed a federal class-action lawsuit



NASA/JPL-CALTECH

Staff at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory are up in arms over new rules on background checks.

against background checks that they see as violations of privacy.

All 5,000 employees at JPL face a 27 October deadline for complying with a Bush administration directive, which requires fingerprinting and extensive background checks before employees can receive new identification badges. The researchers who are suing — including several of JPL's most senior scientists — object to open-ended probes of personal issues, including sexual preference.

Attorneys for the scientists are seeking a preliminary injunction to halt the checks. The suit is against NASA, the US Department of Commerce, and the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, which employs and manages JPL staff.

Publishers campaign against open access

The Association of American Publishers* is taking part in an initiative to protest against what it calls government interference in the scholarly communication process.

Some groups and legislators are pushing for all publicly financed research to be made freely available to the public. Many traditional publishers object, and some have used aggressive tactics to fight the movement (see *Nature* 445, 347; 2007).

The initiative — called the Partnership for Research Integrity in Science and Medicine — says that it wants to provide the public with more information about scholarly publishing. One of its principles is that “society is best served by sustainable business models and reasonable copyright protections”. News of the group's formation did not go down well in the blogosphere, where a number of critics attacked it for implying that open-access publication harms peer review.

**Nature's* US division, Nature America, is a member of the Association of American Publishers.

Biodiversity agency to sue over endangered species

Tired of one-off lawsuits over species it feels should be protected under the Endangered Species Act, a US conservation group has gone all out. The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, Arizona, has announced its intention to sue the US government in an enormous lawsuit covering 55 plant and animal species, including Florida manatees (pictured).

The move comes in response to claims that a now-ousted government official, Julie MacDonald of the Department of the Interior, acted as a lone wolf in meddling with agency scientific reports about which species should be listed or de-listed for protection. “The idea that she was this singular bad apple that has been excised is ridiculous,” says Kieran Suckling, policy director for the conservation group.

The suit will go after an alleged systematic pattern of scientists being illegally overruled by political officials. “I cannot comment on pending legal matters, but I can tell you that the Department of the Interior takes very seriously its responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act,” says Chris Paolino, a spokesman for the department.



D. PERRINE/NATUREPL.COM