

ON THE RECORD

“To do this would be a radical violation of human dignity.”

The Roman Catholic bishops of England and Wales claim that pending legislation will allow researchers to make half-human-half-animal embryos using the egg of a woman and sperm of an animal. “A radical violation of the truth,” was scientists’ response to the bishops’ statement.

SCORE CARD



Animal health

Pedometers are being fitted to British dairy cows to monitor their health — they don’t walk as far when they are sick.



Animal mental health

German zoologist Peter Arras has called Berlin Zoo’s celebrity polar bear Knut a “psychopath” and says that he won’t be able to mate.

ZOO NEWS

Poor Polly

A bicycle that was abandoned by a man trying to enter Belarus illegally last week turned out to be harbouring 277 parrots, stuffed 40 to 50 to a cage.



OVERHYPED

Bigfoot on Mars?

A NASA image showing a humanoid on Mars was widely circulated by the media last week. *Sidelines* is surprised that they had the time, what with the hundreds of sightings of Elvis here on Earth that need following up...

Sources: Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *The Times*, *The Independent*, Reuters, NASA

M. DURHAM/NATUREPL.COM

SIDELINES

Cash for Russian nuclear scientists criticized

A post-cold-war US programme that pays nuclear weapons scientists from the former Soviet Union to prevent them working for ‘rogue’ states has come under fire in Congress, after a governmental investigative report questioned its usefulness.

The Initiatives for Proliferation Prevention (IPP) programme run by the Department of Energy (DOE) pays nuclear scientists in Russia, Ukraine, Libya, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan and Iraq to work on non-proliferation technologies with potential commercial applications. It was established in 1994 after the fall of the Soviet Union, with the goal of keeping destitute scientists in jobs and discouraging them from working with states that pursue nuclear programmes outside international agreements, such as Pakistan. But fewer than half the scientists currently being paid by the IPP have any weapons expertise, and programme money has been used to recruit new weapons scientists too young to have been part of the Soviet weapons complex, according to testimony to a Congressional committee last week by Robert Robinson, a managing director at the US Government Accountability Office (GAO). According to a GAO report published last month, the DOE has no exit strategy for the programme — no criteria to ‘graduate’ institutes and individuals from the programme once they cease being proliferation risks.

A similar US State Department programme plans to end by 2012, and has already stopped projects in 17 Russian and Ukrainian institutes — even though the DOE has kept its programmes in the same places. “There’s reason to wonder if perhaps the IPP programme has been counterproductive,” says Robinson, who supervised the report. “The Russians and Ukrainians themselves contend that it’s not all that relevant to modern realities.” At the hearing, Congressional representatives lashed out at the programme. “There is a thin line between the noble and the naive,” said John Dingell, a Democrat from Michigan and chair of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce.

Since its inception, IPP has spent US\$309 million on almost 17,000 scientists, and was given \$30 million for 2008. Bart Stupak, another Michigan Democrat on the House committee, wonders if such small amounts of money, spread across so many scientists, could really deter them from selling their secrets. “\$35 a day isn’t going to keep anyone from doing anything,” he says. The report notes Russia’s recent budget surpluses and that some of its research institutes have been renovated — one has a marble foyer and a fine art collection.

Henry Sokolski, director of the Washington DC-based Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, questions the IPP’s premise, saying that the US should have encouraged weapons scientists to emigrate to the West rather

than “bribing” them not to sell their weapons secrets. He says the programmes have perpetuated Russian weapons complexes instead of shrinking them. But Elena Sokova, of the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, California, supports programmes that target brain drain, and says that paying scientists to work on civilian non-proliferation research does dilute their work on weapons. The problem, she says, is real. A 2003 survey of more than 600 Russian scientists found that 20% said they would consider working for terrorists or for states that sponsor terrorism.

Adam Scheinman, the DOE’s assistant deputy administrator in the office of non-proliferation and international security, says that he is working towards establishing stricter graduation criteria and is already shifting emphasis away from Russian programmes and towards scientists in Iraq and Libya. He acknowledged at the hearing that it is difficult to provide hard evidence that the programme money is keeping nuclear secrets safe, but said there is soft evidence that the programme is instilling a more ethical and transparent culture within the weapons complexes. “We are making a difference, even if I can’t count it on my fingers and toes,” he told legislators.

Eric Hand



Ex-Soviet soldiers destroying an SS-19 missile.