Biomedical briefing

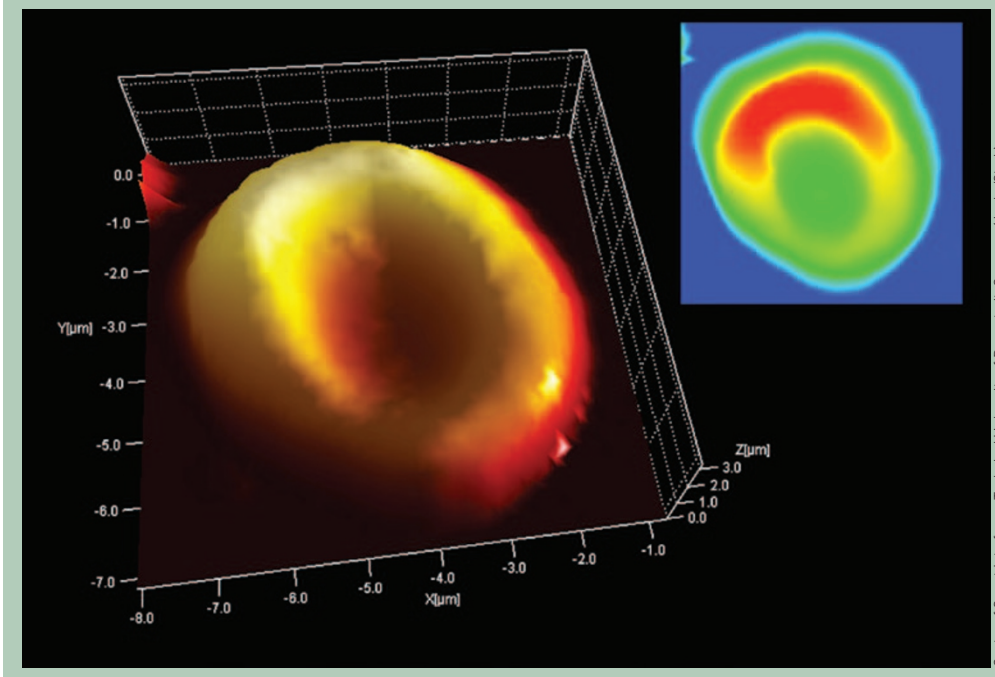
POLICY

French facelift

As part of the fallout from the scandal over the diabetes medicine Mediator (benfluorex), France is overhauling and renaming its agency responsible for regulating drugs and medical devices. On 1 May, the French government dissolved the Health Products Safety Agency (AFSSAPS) and replaced it with the National Agency for the Safety of Medicines and Health Products (ANSM). Dominique Maraninchi, an oncologist who moved to AFSSAPS last year from the French National Cancer Institute, will lead the new agency. "Reaching out to somebody like him was a big signal that they wanted someone totally independent," says Thomas Ricketts, a health policy researcher at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill who runs the politics and administration program at the French School of Public Health in Paris and Rennes.

Biotech blueprint

On 26 April, the US government outlined a master plan for bolstering the country's life sciences industry that includes increased investment in basic research and development, reduced regulatory burdens and support for transitioning discoveries from the bench to the market. Building on a number of existing programs, the 'National Bioeconomy Blueprint', released by the White House, also details new initiatives, including an effort to develop genomics-based methods for cataloguing biosecurity threats and a proposal to improve information technology and medical device training at the country's Food and Drug Administration (FDA).



Center of Smart Interfaces, Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany (Janko/Stark)

World's oldest known blood found in iceman's wounds

You cannot get blood from a stone, but it turns out you can get it from a 5,300-year-old ice mummy. That's the conclusion of a paper published last month describing the shape and molecular composition of red blood cells isolated from the wounded right hand and back of Ötzi the Iceman, who was excavated in the Italian Alps in 1991 (*J. R. Soc. Interface* doi:10.1098/rsif.2012.0174, 2012). "This is something that people were looking for ever since the Iceman was discovered 20 years ago," says Albert Zink, of the Institute for Mummies and the Iceman in Bolzano, Italy, who led the work. Although Ötzi's blood was healthy, Zink says the findings should prompt scientists to examine blood cells of other ancient human remains to look for signs of illnesses such as malaria and sickle cell anemia.

Student support

In an effort to double the number of South African graduate students trained in biomedical research, on 26 April the nation's Department of Health launched a 500 million rand ($65 million) initiative to enroll 1,000 new doctoral students in the life sciences by 2022. "We are going to create a leadership with enormous capacity," says Bongani Mayosi, a cardiologist at the University of Cape Town and the chairman of South Africa's National Health Research Committee. In the future, the so-called 'National Health Scholars Programme' also aims to fund postdocs, midcareer fellows and research chairs in the health sciences.

Old drugs, new tricks

In what Francis Collins, director of the US National Institutes of Health, described as the "first signature initiative" of the agency's nascent drug development hub, the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS) has reached a deal with three major pharmaceutical companies to find new uses for a cache of 24 abandoned compounds. Under the terms of the agreement, unveiled on 3 May, the three firms involved—Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Eli Lilly—will retain ownership of the drugs, and NCATS-funded scientists will own any intellectual property stemming from their discoveries. NCATS is putting up $20 million of its $575 million annual budget next year toward the effort. In December, AstraZeneca made a similar pact with the UK Medical Research Council to share 22 compounds.

A taxing issue

California voters went to the polls this month to decide more than the fate of the Republican Party's presidential nominee. On 5 June, residents of the Golden State voted whether to impose an additional $1 tax on cigarette

packs that would go to support smoking-cessation efforts as well as research on cancer, heart disease and other tobacco-related illnesses. The fate of the ballot initiative was still unknown as *Nature Medicine* went to press.

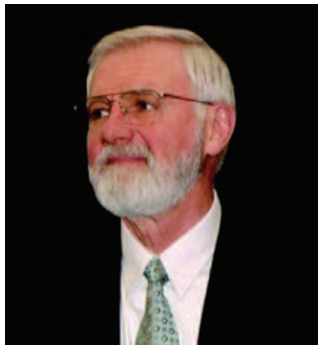
PEOPLE

Lone Star resignation

Alfred Gilman announced plans last month to step down as chief scientific officer of the Austin-based Cancer Prevention and Research Institute of Texas (CPRIT), citing problems with the peer-review process at the $3 billion state agency. "Your most critical concern will be to keep the external peer review system intact," Gilman wrote in a resignation letter, dated 8 May, to CPRIT executive director William Gimson. "Negative actions would […] be extremely harmful to the research community's view of science in Texas and, thus, on the ability to recruit scientists to the state." Gilman, a Nobel prize–winning biochemist, plans to leave the three-year-old institute in October.

Free from smallpox

The American epidemiologist who led the US Centers for Disease Control's campaign to eradicate smallpox in the 1970s has been tapped to receive one of the nation's highest civilian honors. On 26 April, the White House named former CDC director William Foege as one of the 13 recipients of this year's Presidential Medals of Freedom. Among his many accomplishments, Foege (pictured) served as executive director of the Carter Center in Atlanta, as a medical advisor to the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and as executive director of the Task Force for Child Survival and Development, a nonprofit headquartered in Atlanta.



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BUSINESS

Bye-bye baby

Pfizer is following through on its plans, announced last year, to focus on its core business and divest its divisions devoted to infant nutrition and animal health. On 23 April, the New York–based drugmaker sold its baby-food business to Switzerland's Nestlé for close to $12 billion, a price that exceeded most analysts' expectations. "Pfizer should be happy about the way the sale worked out," says Damien Conover, who covers the pharmaceutical industry for Morningstar in Chicago. Pfizer is expected to spin off its animal-health unit by the end of the summer.

Carrot and stick

US regulators have, for the first time, given the go-ahead to a human biologic manufactured in plant cells. On 2 May, the Israeli company Protalix Biotherapeutics and its partner, Pfizer, won approval for Elelyso (taliglucerase alfa), an enzyme-replacement therapy for the treatment of Gaucher's disease. Because Elelyso is made using genetically engineered carrot cells, the recombinant protein can be produced at a much lower cost than existing Gaucher's drugs, which are manufactured in mammalian cells (see *Nat. Med.* **18**, 5, 2012).

Good grief

Five and a half years after Pfizer pulled the plug on torcetrapib—a drug designed to elevate blood levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or 'good' cholesterol—Roche is now making a similar move. On 7 May, the Swiss pharma giant announced plans to halt development of its own HDL-raising compound, dalcetrapib, after an interim review of the company's pivotal 15,000-person trial found no signs of clinically meaningful efficacy. Despite Roche's negative findings, some experts still believe that other HDL modulators in clinical testing, including Merck's anacetrapib and Eli Lilly's evacetrapib, will hold therapeutic promise. "It would be a mistake to close the door on this class of compounds," says Robert Rosenson, director of cardiometabolic disorders at the Mount Sinai Heart Institute in New York.

Faster than Viagra

A pill that helps men achieve erections within 15 minutes won US approval in late April. As a phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitor, the new drug, known as Stendra (avanafil), falls into the same class as other erectile dysfunction medicines but is supposed to work at least twice as fast as existing agents such as Pfizer's Viagra (sildenafil citrate). Stendra is the sole product on the market from Mountain View, California–based Vivus, which is awaiting a decision from US regulators in mid-July on its weight-loss pill Qnexa (see page 843).

Clopidogrel clones

Another megablockbuster drug has tumbled off the patent cliff. On 17 May, the FDA approved the first generic versions of Plavix (clopidogrel), a popular blood thinner marketed jointly by New York–based Bristol-Myers Squibb and Paris-based Sanofi. "For patients who couldn't afford Plavix previously, the cost will be much less," says Shamir Mehta, a cardiologist at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario. Notably, he adds, "that should improve compliance." Plavix generated an estimated $43 billion in global sales during its 15 years on the market.

More online

Infections cause one in six cancers:
go.nature.com/JwHghX

Vaginal microbes vary over time:
go.nature.com/YFvWkV

Cannabinoid research blunted:
go.nature.com/zUjGIM

FDA outpaces its global peers at drug reviews

The FDA is often criticized for taking too long to approve new medicines. But over the past decade, the US agency actually reviewed applications and gave the nod to new drugs faster than either the European Medicines Agency (EMA) or Health Canada. "Pretty consistently the FDA was coming out on top," says Nicholas Downing, a medical student at the Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, who published the findings last month in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (doi:10.1056/NEJMsa1200223, 2012). See go.nature.com/IYQn3W for more.