

## Pharmaceutical firm wins access to vast Chinese DNA library

**London** Pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca has signed a deal with Shanghai's Jiao Tong University giving it access to the university's library of DNA samples collected from thousands of schizophrenics.

China is thought to offer a particularly rich seam for genetics research because the population is relatively homogenous, which makes it easier to spot small genetic mutations associated with different diseases (see *Nature* **410**, 10; 2001). AstraZeneca claims that its new project is the largest research programme yet to make use of Chinese DNA.

The university's collection of blood and tissue samples includes some from extended and nuclear families where schizophrenia was prevalent, as well as control samples from unrelated patients.

## UK sets up gene bank to protect rare sheep breeds

**London** A gene bank to protect rare sheep breeds facing extinction because of Britain's foot-and-mouth epidemic has been launched by scientists at York and Leeds universities.

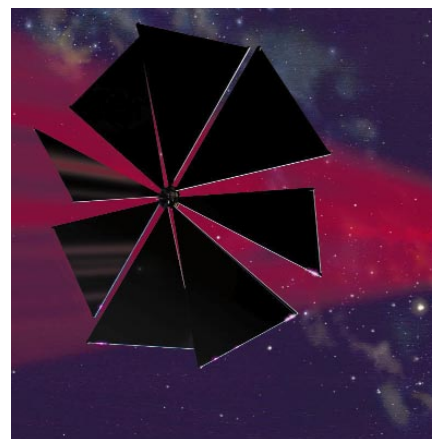
The Heritage GeneBank will collect and freeze semen, eggs and embryos to protect the identities and diversity of British sheep breeds. The scheme will initially concentrate on the Herdwick breed, which is unique to Britain and found mainly in the Lake District in the north of England. About a quarter of the existing 100,000 Herdwick sheep have already been slaughtered. The gene bank also plans to cover other rare and speciality breeds that are under threat.

## Solar sail launch put back as rocket fails

**Washington** Plans for the first ever deployment of a solar sail in space suffered a setback last week when the rocket intended to launch it was damaged during ground testing.

Solar sails are large sheets of material that can, in theory, use radiation from the Sun to propel spacecraft in much the same way as conventional sails use wind to drive ships. Known as Cosmos 1, the 600-metre-square sail was developed by the US-based Planetary Society, a non-profit-making organization dedicated to exploring the Solar system. It was due to be launched on 26 April from a Russian nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea. The society still hopes to launch the sail later this year.

The solar-sail programme has had many



Setting sail: Cosmos 1 was designed to propel spacecraft by harnessing solar power.

critics in the scientific community. Detractors say that the acceleration of the sails would be too slow for them ever to be used for manned space flight.

## Malaria-parasite genome database goes up on web

**Paris** Malaria researchers will be able to access the genome database for the malaria parasite *Plasmodium falciparum* free of charge on the web for the first time, as the result of work done by an international

collaboration led by the University of Pennsylvania.

Individual partners were already running their own databases, but their information has now been compiled in a form that will be easier to use. Specially developed data-mining tools will allow easy searching of the raw data on the parasite's 14 chromosomes, the collaboration says.

Sequencing material for the database was provided by the Institute for Genomic Research and the Naval Medical Research Centre in Maryland, Stanford University in California, and Britain's Sanger Centre.

• <http://plasmodb.org>

## Alternative clinical centre names head

**Washington** Marc Blackman, professor of medicine at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, has been appointed head of the new clinical branch of the US National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM).

The NCCAM was set up by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 1998 to assess alternative and complementary medical therapies. The new branch, to be based on the NIH campus in Bethesda, Maryland, will extend the centre's work by conducting clinical trials of potential treatments.

## Gene-therapy trial for Alzheimer's underway

**San Diego** The first clinical trial to use gene therapy to treat a neurodegenerative disease is being carried out at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD).

Earlier this month, skin cells that had been genetically modified to produce nerve-growth factor were implanted into the brain of a 60-year-old woman with Alzheimer's disease. Researchers Mark Tuszynski of UCSD and Fred Gage of the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, placed the cells in an area of the brain called the nucleus basalis. Patients with Alzheimer's are known to lose cells from this area.

Some experts are concerned that the implanted cells have not been engineered to contain 'suicide' genes, which would allow them to be destroyed if they cause unwanted side effects. A recent trial involving the use of fetal brain cells to treat Parkinson's disease has raised similar concerns (see *Nature* 410, 401; 2001).

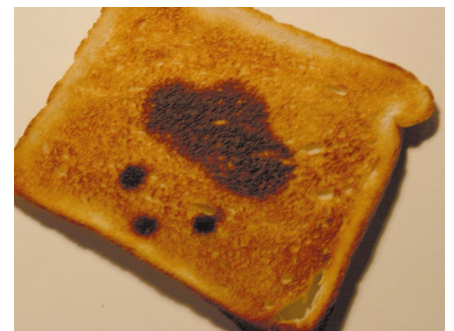
## Toast the Internet over breakfast

**London** Decisive proof that the Internet really is changing our lives has arrived, with the development of a toaster that can link to the

World-Wide Web and imprint the weather forecast onto your breakfast.

The toaster plugs into the Internet using a normal telephone connection and downloads the day's forecast from a specially designed website. The bread is then toasted normally until the final 20–30 seconds, when a stencil in the shape of sun, rain or cloud rolls out over the heating element. The forecast is visible as a dark pattern on the toast.

Robin Southgate, a design student at Brunel University in west London, developed the toaster in conjunction with Stan Swallow of the university's Design for Life centre. He hopes to use more flexible stencils to display text messages or adverts on toast.



Your toast: a stencil allows images from the web to be imprinted onto your daily bread.