

Fraud conviction casts doubt on study into prayer-power

San Francisco Exposure of an author's fraudulent history has prompted concerns about a paper that claims Christian prayer doubles the success rate of *in vitro* fertilization (IVF). The paper has now been removed from the website of the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*.

Daniel Wirth, a Californian lawyer and psychic researcher, and Rogerio Lobo and Kwang Cha, both at Columbia University in New York at the time of the research, found that women undergoing IVF were twice as likely to become pregnant if they were prayed for by people in a different country (K. Y. Cha, D. P. Wirth and R. A. Lobo *J. Reprod. Med.* **46**, 781–787; 2001).

Earlier this year, Wirth pleaded guilty to defrauding the Pennsylvania cable company Adelphia Communications of more than \$1 million. Many scientists then began to question the validity of the data in his paper, especially as it also emerged that Wirth was alleged in those proceedings to have used false identities, and has authored many pieces of research claiming to prove paranormal activities. Wirth is now under house arrest in California.

Donna Kessel, managing editor of the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine*, says that the paper was peer-reviewed but that she is now carrying out an investigation into the study. Columbia University is also looking into the work.

Nobel laureate takes the reins at Berkeley laboratory

Washington Nobel-prizewinning physicist Steven Chu has been named as the next director of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California.

Chu, the first Asian-American to run a US Department of Energy laboratory, comes from Stanford University to replace retiring director Charles Shank.

The University of California, which manages the lab for the government, hopes



Incoming: Steven Chu is returning home to the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

Brazil becomes fresh haunt for ghost shark



San Diego Brazilian biologists say that they have found a new species of 'ghost shark' or chimaera.

Ichthyologist Jules Soto and his colleagues at the Vale do Itajai University in Santa Catarina first spotted the new fish in photographs taken by their students on a fishing boat off the coast of Rio de Janeiro in 2001. They spent three years finding more samples and characterizing the

species (above) and have submitted their report to the journal *Zootaxa*.

The fish are relatives of sharks and can grow up to 2 metres long. They live at depths of 500 metres and are thought to have changed little in 150 million years. More than 30 species of chimaera have so far been described. They have been found in most waters around the world, although none had been sighted off Brazil.

that Chu will help it win a contract to continue to run the lab, says the university's president, Robert Dynes. Following a spate of management and security scandals at federal labs, the US government invited fresh bids for contracts to manage Lawrence Berkeley and two nuclear-weapons labs — Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

Chu won a Nobel prize in 1997 for using lasers to cool atoms while at Bell Laboratories in Murray Hill, New Jersey, and Stanford. But he began his career as a graduate student at the Berkeley lab. "To me, it feels like a homecoming," he says.

Flow chart plots water loss for Colorado river

San Diego The Grand Canyon area of the United States, through which the Colorado River flows, is experiencing one of the worst droughts in 500 years, hydrologists say.

The Colorado and its side rivers are the primary source of water for millions of people in the densely populated Los Angeles and San Diego areas of southern California. But water flow from the Colorado basin has been below average for five years in a row.

Using observations and tree-ring measurements, scientists at the US Geological Survey (USGS) have reconstructed the Colorado River's water flow for the past half millennium. They found that the average annual flow from 1999 to 2003 was almost twice as low as it was during the dry Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, and even lower than during the severe drought of 1590–94.

The drought is probably a symptom of climate change, says the report's lead author Robert Webb, a hydrologist for the USGS in Tucson, Arizona. "It could end very soon, but it could also last for 30 years — and then we would really be in trouble."

Collaboration powers up drive to archive digital data

Washington How can the burgeoning mass of digital records found everywhere from labs to schools be preserved? Those with answers should apply to the US National Science Foundation (NSF), which has set aside about \$2 million to address the issue.

NSF officials say that most people don't consider long-term storage when they copy data onto compact discs or hard drives. Some ambitious projects to create records of digital information are already under way, including the non-profit Internet Archive in San Francisco, which stores some 30 billion web pages on conventional computer servers. But such storage is vulnerable to accidents and erratic funding, officials say.

The grants, issued in conjunction with the Library of Congress and announced on 16 June, are available for researchers working on the hardware, software and management issues for preserving digital records.

♦ www.digitalpreservation.gov

Historian lands leading role for Muslim science

London The next head of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) — the main intergovernmental body of Muslim countries — has pledged to improve cooperation between researchers from Muslim countries and others worldwide.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu was elected as secretary-general of the 57-member OIC at its annual meeting of foreign ministers in Istanbul last week. Ihsanoglu, who specializes in the history of science during the Ottoman Empire, is also president of the International Union for the History and Philosophy of Science.

He will hold the OIC position, based at its secretariat in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, for four years, starting in January 2005.