



Behind bars: Bulgarian nurses in court during their trial in Libya in January.

Montagnier speaks out for medics under death sentence in Libya

Washington A group of scientists from around the world is making a last-ditch plea to the Libyan government to spare the lives of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who have been sentenced to death.

In May, the healthcare workers were convicted of deliberately infecting 400 children in a Libyan hospital with HIV, and sentenced to death by firing squad.

Luc Montagnier, one of the co-discoverers of HIV, investigated the case with Vittorio Colizzi of Tor Vergata University in Rome. They concluded that the virus was more likely to have been spread through unsterile hospital practices than by deliberate infection.

On 23 June, Montagnier and a group of scientists sent a letter to Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi asking him to commute the medics' death sentences. The letter, organized by Physicians for Human Rights in Boston, Massachusetts, included signatures from the other co-discoverer of HIV — Robert Gallo of the Institute of Virology in Baltimore — and 28 other scientists from Egypt, Iran, France, the West Bank and Gaza, and four other countries.

Libya has so far not responded to pleas for leniency from nations such as the United States, says Montagnier, but he hopes they will listen to the scientists' protest. "This is a very important issue of human rights," Montagnier says.

Lawyers are expected to appeal against the sentences in mid-July.

Don't mention 'therapeutic cloning', society says

New York Scientists working on human cloning are being urged to change their vocabulary. The International Society for Stem Cell Research is asking its members to use the phrase 'nuclear transfer' instead of 'therapeutic cloning' in future papers and in communications with the public and press,

after discussions at its annual meeting in Boston in June.

Experts say that 'nuclear transfer' is a more accurate term for the process, which involves inserting a nucleus from one cell into an egg stripped of its own genetic material.

The society says the switch is also aimed at avoiding widespread confusion among the public and legislators between 'therapeutic cloning', in which the resulting embryo is used to make stem cells for medical research, and 'reproductive cloning' to make babies.

"You can end up banning by accident things you didn't mean to ban," says stem-cell researcher Lawrence Goldstein of the University of California, San Diego.

Meeting instrumental to saving science history

New York Do you have a load of antique scientific instruments gathering dust in a university storeroom? If so, Francis Manasek, who chaired a meeting on scientific collections last week at Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, would like to hear from you.

Instruments that figure prominently in major discoveries — such as the first clock used to measure longitude at sea — usually make their way into museums. But Manasek, a research scholar in physics and astronomy at Dartmouth, is keen to preserve less famous objects, too. "They aren't just pretty items," he says. Even simple slide rules or microscopes can help to illuminate, among other things, the evolution of scientific teaching, he says.

Manasek hopes that the meeting — at which some 80 participants reviewed practical matters such as laws for displaying artefacts and handling mercury — will help to spread the preservation movement.

US and Europe agree a position on global navigation

London The United States and the European Union (EU) have signed a deal to cooperate over satellite navigation, settling a long-running dispute over the EU's planned Galileo satellites.

Europe has long been keen to have its own satellite navigation system, independent of the US Global Positioning System (GPS). But the system it initially proposed for its Galileo satellites had the potential to interfere with a signal used by the US military, leading the United States to protest.

Both parties have now agreed to use the same system for new navigation satellites. This has slightly less precision than the one originally favoured by Europe. But by both systems operating together, experts say they will gain greater accuracy and reliability.

Medical highlights get a dusting off online

London Papers from some of the world's oldest medical journals, dating back over the past 125 years, are to be made freely available online.

Work from about 15 journals will be put on PubMed Central, a digital archive run by the US National Library of Medicine, thanks to £1.25 million (US\$2.3 million) granted by the UK government and the Wellcome Trust — a London-based medical charity.

Famous papers encompassed by the project include the 1939 report in *Annals of Surgery* of the successful repair of a faulty heart artery in a newborn baby, and research from the 1880s that led to the first solutions used to keep cells alive in culture.

The papers should start to appear online by early 2005.

High-protein study hints at fertility problems

Berlin Women who follow the Atkins diet may be reducing their chances of becoming pregnant, researchers reported at the European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology meeting in Berlin on 28 June.

"The data indicate that a high-protein diet is not advisable while trying to conceive," says David Gardner of the Colorado Center for Reproductive Medicine in Englewood, Colorado, who led the study.

The popular Atkins slimming diet restricts carbohydrates and includes more protein than is generally recommended by dietitians.

Gardner's team found that mice fed a diet packed with 25% protein before conception were less likely to produce viable offspring. About 15% of their embryos were miscarried,



compared with just 1% of embryos in mice fed a standard diet of 14% protein.

The researchers think that the high-protein diet may alter genetic imprinting — the process by which genes are stamped as being from the mother or the father, which affects their expression in the embryo.