

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

UK health research

The UK government has welcomed a call for simpler medical-research regulations. An 11 January report from the Academy of Medical Sciences in London recommends the creation of a new health-research agency to offer a single body for governance and ethics checks of new clinical trials. It also calls for reform of the European Union's much-criticized Clinical Trials Directive legislation, and for improvements in the UK National Health Service's attitude towards research. Health secretary Andrew Lansley said in a statement that the government would "consider carefully how to implement" the academy's advice. See go.nature.com/vi8rcp for more.

Data-sharing pact

An international coalition of 17 public and private funders has endorsed a statement calling for greater sharing of public-health research data.

SOUND BITE

“Is it possible that he was wrong, but not dishonest ... ? No.”

The British Medical Journal (BMJ) on Andrew Wakefield, who is alleged, in a BMJ investigation published last week, to have manipulated patient medical histories in a 1998 paper in *The Lancet* linking childhood vaccines to autism and bowel disease.

Source: *Br. Med. J.* **342**, c7452 (2011).



T. BLACKWOOD/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Australian floods pose threat to reefs

A mix of pesticides, fertilizers and other flood run-off could threaten the biodiversity of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Heavy rains since late December have resulted in flooding in the state of Queensland, and satellite imagery

shows large quantities of sediment streaming out of the Burdekin River and towards southern stretches of the reef, resulting in algal blooms. Previous floods have also caused population spikes in coral-eating starfish.

Signatories include the US National Institutes of Health, Britain's Wellcome Trust and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The statement calls on funders to establish "equitable", "ethical" and "efficient" data-sharing policies.

Food costs soar

World food prices reached a record high last month, according to a report released on 5 January by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Rome. The Food Price Index, which covers dairy products, meat, sugar, cereals and oilseeds, averaged 214.7 points for December 2010, up 4.2% from 206 points a month earlier and slightly above the previous peak of 213.5 points in June 2008, when food prices triggered riots in a number of countries.

This is the highest the index has reached since it was created in 1990. See go.nature.com/tf17dz for more.

University law

Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan president, has vetoed a law that would have placed university budgets and elections in the hands of 'communal councils' of local citizens. The approval of the University Law late last year by the country's outgoing National Assembly sparked protests by students and researchers. The law is now with the newly elected assembly, whose members took their seats on 5 January.

Converging science

The integration of biology with physical sciences and engineering is a research model that deserves to be encouraged by specific

facilities and more funding, a group of high-profile scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge have urged. They published a report on 4 January that dubbed such cross-disciplinary work 'convergence', and argued that funding agencies should reorganize themselves to better support the concept. See go.nature.com/o7xus2 for more.

Oil-spill report

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill was caused by a string of avoidable mistakes, says the US presidential panel tasked with investigating the blowout on 20 April 2010 and the resulting spill. The explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig killed 11 workers and led to the release of about 5 million barrels of oil into the Gulf. The

S. WALSH/AP

national oil-spill commission, whose full report is out this week, blamed the spill on errors by the companies involved, including BP — who owned the well — and contractors Transocean and Halliburton, as well as lax government regulators.

PEOPLE

FDA official leaves

The deputy commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) leaves his post this week to head the state of Maryland's health department. Joshua Sharfstein arrived with the administration of President Barack Obama in 2009 to help steer an agency that critics said had become too friendly with the drug, device and food manufacturers it regulates. During Sharfstein's tenure, the FDA curbed prescription of the diabetes drug Avandia, admitted it erred in approving a device used in knee surgeries and effectively banned the sale of drinks that are manufactured to contain both alcohol and caffeine.

Representative shot

A lone gunman's assassination attempt on congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (Democrat, Arizona), who chaired a subcommittee that oversees NASA, is sending ripples through the science and



space communities. Giffords (pictured) was shot in the head at a public meeting on 8 January, in an attack that killed 6 and wounded 14 other people. As *Nature* went to press she was in critical condition. She was elected to the House of Representatives in 2007 and is also an active supporter of renewable energies such as solar power and of the America COMPETES Act, which encourages increased science funding.

BUSINESS

Stem-cell trial

The US Food and Drug Administration has given the green light for a third human trial using human embryonic stem cells. Advanced Cell Technology (ACT), which last November won approval to use the stem cells to treat a rare form of juvenile blindness called Stargardt's disease,

announced on 3 January that it had received the go-ahead to use the cells in a trial of adults with a related but far more common condition: age-related macular degeneration. The company, based in Santa Monica, California, said it would also pursue approval for a trial in Europe. See go.nature.com/xyjy7 for more.

Rare-earth rules

China is preparing new standards to govern the production of rare-earth metals, according to state media reports. The metals — scandium, yttrium and the lanthanides — are key to electronic equipment and green technology, in part because of their use in batteries. China controls the lion's share of world production and last year hinted that it could raise taxes and reduce exports. The regulations could be officially released as soon as February. See go.nature.com/lqnt3d for more.

Journal launched

A new open-access journal, *Scientific Reports*, will release its first batch of articles in June 2011. The peer-reviewed online publication, announced by Nature Publishing Group on 6 January, will accept biology, chemistry, physics and Earth sciences papers deemed scientifically sound

COMING UP

19–21 JANUARY

Environmental scientists and policy-makers meet in Washington DC to discuss how to protect and restore the world's oceans, at a conference convened by the US National Council for Science and the Environment.

go.nature.com/6w465b

and original without regard to the significance of the research, a policy similar to that of the journal *PLoS ONE*. *Scientific Reports* will charge researchers for publication: US\$1,350 for manuscripts accepted in 2011 and \$1,700 for those accepted in 2012.

RESEARCH

Tevatron to close

The US Department of Energy has decided not to fund a three-year extension of the Tevatron, the particle collider at the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Illinois. It will close at the end of the 2011 fiscal year. See page 141 for more.

Planck data released

Scientists with the Planck space mission have unveiled its first results. Launched in 2009, the €600-million (US\$770-million) spacecraft is designed to study the cosmic microwave background, the radiation released just after the Big Bang. The satellite has also discovered scores of objects and evidence of primordial galaxies that have star formation rates 10–1,000 times that of the Milky Way today, scientists said at a press conference on 11 January. Planck's data collection continues, with a complete microwave map expected in January 2013.

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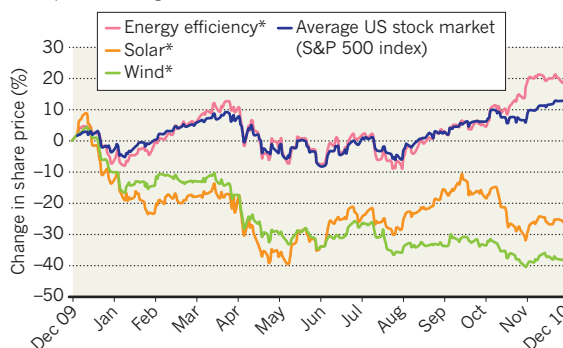
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BUSINESS WATCH

Clean energy stocks tracked by the WilderHill New Energy Global Innovation Index fell 14.6% overall in 2010, mainly because of the poor performance of the index's solar and wind companies (see chart). Ethan Zindler of analysts Bloomberg New Energy Finance says a race to drive down the price of solar panels and wind turbines was largely responsible — good for the market, but bad for sales figures. Investor uncertainty over subsidies also contributed to the decline.

CLEAN-ENERGY SLUMP

Shares of solar and wind companies dipped even though US stocks rose overall in 2010. But companies working on energy efficiency — from power management to electric vehicles — fared better.



*Collation of companies involved in these sectors, as tracked by the WilderHill New Energy Global Innovation Index

SOURCE: BLOOMBERG NEW ENERGY FINANCE/WILDERHILL NEW ENERGY INDEX