US call for more equitable policy on transplant organs

[WASHINGTON] The US Institute of Medicine last week recommended that scarce transplant livers should be distributed across broad geographic regions, ensuring that the sickest patients receive them, rather than those who happen to live near at hand.

The institute's report supports a policy proposed last year by the Clinton administration, which ordered the United Network for Organ Sharing (UNOS), the group that allocates organs, to distribute them more broadly. The proposal sparked controversy, so Congress requested the report, delaying any change until October.

The report said that "improvements in fairness and effectiveness could be made" to the current system. Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, said last week that she would put the change into effect quickly. But Congress may give UNOS the power to determine its own policies.

Academies set to give backing to GM crops

[LONDON] **Seven academies of science from developed and developing countries have agreed to develop "an authoritative joint statement" on genetic modification in world agriculture. It is expected to agree that the technology is needed to feed future populations.**

The statement is due to be completed by the end of the year by representatives of academies from Brazil, China, India, Mexico, the United Kingdom, the United States and the Third World Academy of Sciences.

Participants at a meeting held this month in London rejected a proposal from the Third World academy to call for an end to the patenting of food crops.

Asteroid on target to give Earth a near miss

[MUNICH] The asteroid 1999 AN 10, predicted to intersect with Earth's orbit in 2027, will not collide with our planet, according to calculations by the German Space Agency. The asteroid will pass 390,000 kilometres from the Earth, equivalent to the average distance between the Earth and the Moon.

1999 AN 10, which has a diameter of about one kilometre, was discovered last January by the US asteroid-search programme LINEAR. But its orbit could not be calculated until it was rediscovered by two German amateur astronomers on archived photographs taken in 1955.

Plea to UK government on cloning research

[LONDON] **A complete ban on all cloning research would be "unethical", according to the scientific adviser to Britain's Association of Medical Research Charities. Sir Leslie Turnberg, former president of the Royal College of Physicians, argues in a letter to the *Times* newspaper that cloning research for therapeutic purposes ought to be continued, given its potential to treat diseases.**

The letter follows a recent announcement by the UK government that it needs more time to decide whether to allow 'therapeutic' cloning techniques to be used on human embryos, even though they are permitted under current legislation (see *Nature* 400, 4; 1999). Turnberg writes that it would be "shameful" if all forms of cloning research were banned because "society could not trust itself or its scientists to maintain the law".

Unions plan protests at Russian funding gap

[MOSCOW] Russian science has received only two-thirds of the budget it was promised by the government in the first half of this year, says Valery Sobolev, head of the scientific trade unions and social unions co-ordinating committee. Sobolev says his

organization is preparing a series of protests.

The committee says the government promised to borrow US$5 million from abroad to transfer to scientists, but nothing has been received.

The critics also point out that a revised budget stipulates that only two per cent of state expenditure should be devoted to science, although legislation requires four per cent. Yet military spending is set to increase by 33 per cent.

Japanese bid to end confusion on dioxin limits

[TOKYO] **The Japanese parliament last week approved legislation stipulating permissible levels of dioxins — known endocrine disrupters and suspected carcinogens — in air, soil and water. The law, which takes effect early next year, sets standards for the levels of dioxins released from waste incinerators, the main source of emissions, and from factories.**

The maximum tolerable daily intake (TDI) of dioxin is set at four picograms per kilogram of body fat. It is hoped that this will help the Environment Agency and the Ministry of Health and Welfare, which currently set different TDI values, to decide on a common standard. The government aims to reduce dioxin emissions by 90 per cent from 1997 levels by 2002 (see *Nature* 398, 362; 1999).

Euro parliament member warns US on trade wars

[STRASBOURG] The newly elected president of the European Parliament's committee on environment, public health and consumer protection has warned the United States not appeal to 'pure science' alone in trade disputes over products such as bovine growth hormone and genetically modified crops.

British Conservative Caroline Jackson said last week that there is "a big difference between Europe and the United States on this type of thing". She said her committee may decide to address the extent to which the World Trade Organization is required to use judgements on scientific validity as a basis of adjudicating on trade disputes.

Jackson is an active member of the European People's Party, a grouping of centre-right candidates which won the largest number of seats in last month's parliamentary elections. During the allocation of committee responsibilities last week, Carlos Westendorp Y Cabeza, a Spanish socialist, was elected chair of the parliamentary committee that oversees the European Commission's Framework research programmes.

Nobel laureate Mullis hangs up his surfboard

[SAN DIEGO] **Nobel laureate Kary Mullis, the inventor of the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) used to amplify DNA, has joined a medical diagnostic firm in Irvine, California. Since winning the prize in 1993, Mullis has led a peripatetic life, consulting for biotech firms, writing, surfing and skating.**

Mullis, now director of molecular biology at Burstein Laboratories, is overseeing the development of laser-disc technology for medical analysis. "Everyone has to take a job sometime," says Mullis, who had been living off the Nobel award. When he devised PCR, Mullis was a researcher at Cetus Corp., which reaped virtually all the economic benefit.

correction: French genome research

Our article on funding for French genome research stated incorrectly that money allocated to a public/private consortium would be used to develop a national network of '*genopôles*' (*Nature* **400**, 199; 1999). In fact, these clusters of genome-related labs and companies will be supported through a separate initiative.