

joined forces with researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, to speed up the sequencing of the *Drosophila* genome, according to an announcement last week by the National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI).

The joint effort by the company, based in Rockville, Maryland, and Gerald Rubin, an investigator at Berkeley who is funded by NHGRI, will allow the completion of the 150-million-base-pair fruitfly genome this year, according to an agreement signed by Rubin and J. Craig Venter, president of Celera.

The collaboration will provide “an important pilot” for similar public-private cooperation on the human genome, says Francis Collins, the director of NHGRI.

## Chemical companies to fund health research

[WASHINGTON] The US Chemical Manufacturers Association (CMA) last week launched a \$100 million, five-year programme to fund basic research into the health and environmental effects of common chemicals. The initiative is part of a \$1.2 billion, six-year effort by the industry that includes toxicity testing of 3,000 chemicals made in large quantities, and research on 15,000 others to see whether small quantities disrupt human endocrine systems.

J. Lawrence Wilson, chairman of the CMA board’s Research Committee, said that the project’s openness — it will involve non-industry scientists and will publicly disseminate all results — “reaffirms our industry’s commitment of assuring the safety of our products, even if it hurts”.

## Demoted PhD accused of trying to kill whistleblower

[MUNICH] A German veterinary scientist who was last year stripped of his PhD after an investigation concluded he had manipulated some of his results, has been charged with the attempted murder of the whistleblower in the case, Guangming Xiong.

The scientist had worked at the University of Giessen on the cloning and expression of a rabbit gene encoding a binding protein for a *Pseudomonas* cytotoxin. According to the news magazine *Der Spiegel*, a series of incidents in the university’s Institute of Pharmacology and Toxicology accompanied growing concern about the validity of his work during 1997.

Xiong was taken to hospital and treated in the intensive care unit in June 1997, after drinking tea laced with digitoxin in his laboratory. The accused scientist, who is currently working as a veterinarian in a private practice near Giessen, is appealing

against the derecognition of his PhD thesis, and denies the charge of attempted murder.

## Scientists win highest Australia Day honours

[SYDNEY] Scientists featured more prominently than ever before in this year’s Australia Day honours, winning two of five awards in the country’s top category for community service: Companion of the Order of Australia.

Suzanne Cory, director since 1996 of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute for Medical Research in Melbourne, was recognized for research into the molecular basis of cancer and the genetic “accidents” that cause cancer.

The other winner is Malcolm McIntosh, who has been dependent on dialysis since having both cancerous kidneys removed. McIntosh became chief executive of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation three years ago.

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# US scientists may boycott AIDS congress

[CAPE TOWN] Some researchers are considering boycotting the World AIDS Congress in Durban in 18 months' time, in protest at the decision by South Africa's health minister to abandon a planned pilot programme to administer the antiviral agent AZT to HIV-positive pregnant women.

Nkosazana Zuma's decision was announced in October after a meeting with the health ministers of the country's nine provinces, which are responsible for providing health services in South Africa's federal system. The reason given was that funds to support the programme were not available at provincial level.

The move sparked an outcry, and the volume of complaints increased last month when the government announced plans to spend R30 billion (US\$5 billion) upgrading the country's defence force. Now, several US AIDS researchers say they may not attend the congress unless the policy is changed.

"This is something some of us are actively discussing — we would prefer it didn't come to that, but it might be necessary to get a boycott organized," said one US-based researcher.

Clinical trials in Thailand earlier this year

indicated that administering AZT over the last four weeks of pregnancy and during labour (a 'short-course' regimen) more than halves the mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

Zuma's decision to axe the programme appears not to have been based on the costs of the pilot programme — the French-based International Solidarity Fund has since offered to pay for this — but on fears that it could lead all HIV-positive pregnant women to believe they have a right to the drug.

"There is not much point in running a pilot study unless you can implement its findings," says physician Ian Roberts, special adviser to Zuma. But Roberts indicates that the minister's decision is not necessarily irreversible. "Next year the provinces might have a budget for the programme, depending on the cost at which Glaxo is prepared to supply the drug," he adds.

In neighbouring Botswana, the government has already decided to make the drug available to all such women. The cost of implementing the scheme in South Africa, assuming the pilot programme is successful, is estimated at R80 million (US\$14 million). The country is believed to have an adult infection rate of 15 per cent, with the per-

centage of infected pregnant women varying from 16 to 27 between regions.

But Glenda Gray, co-director of the perinatal HIV research unit at the University of the Witwatersrand's Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, says that a study has shown that the short-course regimen is ultimately more cost-effective than treating children who could have escaped infection.

"The pilot study would have teased out difficulties concerned with implementation, such as securing drug supplies, ensuring safe distribution and dispensation, supplying milk in lieu of breast-feeding, and problems related to responses to intervention, teaching and counselling," says Gray. "Its implementation makes good sense — the only reason Zuma could have made this decision is that she was ill-informed."

Gutaaf Wolvaardt of the Medical Association of South Africa, who is chairman of the organizing committee for the World AIDS Congress in 2000, says he is unaware of any moves by researchers to respond to Zuma's decision by boycotting the congress. "I would question the logic of this, as the congress is not organized by the Minister of Health," he says. **Michael Cherry**

## Palaeontologists divided over 'stay at home' policy for fossils

[LONDON] A group of senior palaeontologists is proposing an international agreement that hominid fossils should not be moved from their country of origin without "compelling" scientific reasons.

In a motion passed earlier this year during its meeting in South Africa, the International Association for the Study of Human Palaeontology (IASHP) urged that requests to move such material must be backed by a demonstration that the investigation could not proceed "in the foreseeable future" in the country of origin.

Not all palaeontologists agree. Some feel that the words "foreseeable future" are too vague, and are concerned that increased restrictions on the movement of fossil hominids could hold back scientific investigation, as the country of origin may lack up-to-date research equipment.

But those keen to press the case for restricting access argue that this is needed to compel greater investment in museums in developing countries. "If you allow fossil hominids to be taken [abroad] every time you want to do a sophisticated analysis, countries are never going to develop," says Bernard Wood, of George Washington University in Washington DC.

The need for restrictions to be tightened was initially raised by Meave Leakey, of the National Museums of Kenya, following a



Leakey: seeks to protect "priceless" fossils and says some sophisticated analyses may be unnecessary.

request that Turkana boy, a 1.6 million-year-old skeleton of *Homo erectus*, be lent to the University of Chicago for an exhibition.

Wood, who put forward the IASHP resolution, says: "We all know developing countries need money. But many are concerned this is not the way to raise it. If it is done this way, there is no pressure on governments to fund museums properly."

Wood adds that, if a government cannot find money for a scientific investigation,

"then it is up to the international community to solve [the problem], without the need to have fossils flying round the world in money-making activities".

But a senior British palaeontologist says that, although he welcomes the attention that the resolution has brought to the issue, he does not support the wording. "It is all very well for scientists to pass this, but it is still museums and governments who make decisions," he says.

"All of us are being continually asked to loan specimens," he adds. "Our policy 20 years ago was not to allow transportation. But in the last ten to fifteen years we have loosened our attitude."

He points out, for example, that the Natural History Museum has been unable to afford expensive computerized tomography and  $\gamma$ -ray dating facilities, and that some "outstanding science" has resulted from its loans to institutions abroad. "The science community is going to have to be realistic," he says.

Leakey describes hominid fossils as "priceless specimens". She says: "We are often asked very difficult questions — such as requests to apply destructive techniques. I ask, what are you going to gain? Technology progresses so fast, you have to be careful not to make a hasty decision." **Natasha Loder**