Dutch challenge to Brussels over biotech directive

[MUNICH] The Dutch government has appealed to the European Court of Justice against the European Union's new directive on the protection of biotechnological inventions, which allows patenting of human genes as well as transgenic plants and animals (see *Nature* **393,** 200; 1998).

The Netherlands had voted against adoption of the directive following a resolution of its parliament two years ago condemning the directive on ethical grounds. The Dutch government is now arguing on technical grounds that the directive should have been subject to unanimous rather than majority voting.

But European Commission officials say the appeal is likely to be rejected. A similar appeal by Spain against a directive relating to legal protection of medicinal products was rejected by the court in 1995.

US panel to advise on women in science

[WASHINGTON] **A national commission is to be established in the United States to advise the government on how women and minorities can be encouraged to succeed in science and engineering, under a law signed last week by President Bill Clinton.**

The commission will consist of seven representatives of industry and four academics, and will be asked to "identify and address the problems associated with the recruitment, retention and advancement" of women and minorities in science and engineering. It will be selected within 90 days and then has a year to prepare its report for the Congress and the president.

The law establishing the commission — which was suggested by the National Science Foundation in 1996 — was initially sponsored by Connie Morella (Republican, Maryland), chair of the technology subcommittee of the House of Representatives Science Committee. It was passed by the House last month and then by the Senate, where the measure was put forward by Senator Olympia Snowe (Republican, Maine).

French public say 'non' to modified organisms

[PARIS] A little over half of the respondents to a survey in France expressed negative feelings about genetically modified organisms, according to the opinion polls company TMO.

One quarter of the 1,000 individuals polled associated genetically modified organisms with danger, and one-fifth considered that they were "against nature". One quarter did not feel strongly either way, classifying the issue as a neutral scientific question.

Only 9 per cent of those surveyed expressed a positive opinion about genetically modified organisms.

Germany's PhDs will see their work go online

[MUNICH] **Germany's main research grant agency, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, is sponsoring research for a digital archive that would provide online access to research carried out by PhDs anywhere in Germany.**

The first results, including instructions for authors, were presented at the Frankfurt book fair last week (for further information see www.educat.hu-berlin.de).

University libraries and five scientific societies, including the German Physical Society and the Society of German Chemists, are collaborating on the archive. They hope to develop software tools that would allow a directed search for components of online documents, such as specific terms, key words or references, that can be indexed.

NASA spacecraft to test new technology

[WASHINGTON] Deep Space 1, the first in a new line of US space missions designed to test advanced tools and techniques for scientific spacecraft, is scheduled to launch from Cape Canaveral, Florida on 25 October, and perhaps sooner. The mission's research objective, to fly past and photograph the asteroid 1992KD at a range of five to ten kilometres next July, is secondary to its testing of 12 new technologies.

These include a combination camera–spectrometer, autonomous navigation capability, and an ion propulsion engine that could provide cheap transport for future planetary spacecraft. Most of the technology evaluation for the $152 million mission will take place in the two months after launch.

Sydney museum boss outlines research vision

[SYDNEY] **Michael Archer, currently a professor of biology in the University of New South Wales, has been appointed director of the Australian Museum in Sydney. He aims to enhance the museum's reputation for research in zoology, marine science, anthropology and Earth sciences by associating the museum with the preservation of the rich Riversleigh and Murgon sites in Queensland, through which he and his research students have revolutionized the dominant view of Australian pre-history.**

Archer also intends to harness the museum's skills in biodiversity research by mounting a large-scale demonstration of the sustainability and economically competitive use of land through harvesting (not farming) native kangaroos, displacing the grazing of sheep, which has caused immense damage to Australia's fragile soils.

India bows to pressure on patents legislation

[NEW DELHI] India has signed the Paris Convention for the protection of intellectual property and has agreed to abide by the Patent Cooperation Treaty. The move ends 30 years of opposition based on the argument that it would destroy Indian industry. Both treaties will be binding on India from 7 December.

Ragunath Mashelkar, secretary for industrial research, says it will benefit domestic research and development, as it will now be possible to submit a single patent application valid in several countries (see *Nature* **394,** 709 ; 1998). But critics who warn of a sudden rise in drug prices say India has been trapped because it cannot get out of the treaty for at least five years.

Archimedes manuscript to go under the hammer

[LONDON] **An original manuscript written by Archimedes in the third century BC, which was erased more than 1,000 years later and overwritten as a Greek religious text, is to be auctioned in New York next week. The 174-leaf manuscript contains the original text of Archimedes' treatises, including *On the Method of Mechanical Theorems* and *On Floating Bodies* (see below). The manuscript is expected to fetch between $800,000 and $1.2 million. It is known as a palimpsest, a text written on vellum leaves from which the writing is washed away or scraped off so that the surface can be reused. Archimedes' writing was restored using digital scanning techniques.**