

Expert panel will advise US officials on genetic testing

[WASHINGTON] Donna Shalala, the US Secretary of Health and Human Services, announced last week that she is creating an Advisory Committee on Genetic Testing to guide her on "broad, department-wide policy issues raised by genetic testing".

The panel of 11 independent experts should be appointed by the end of the year. It will be administered through the Office of Science Policy in the director's office at the National Institutes of Health.

"We need to ensure that test results are accurate and medically valid and that this information remains confidential," Shalala said in a statement. "This new advisory commission creates the mechanism that will help us make sure patients are protected."

Six non-voting members will represent the agencies of the Public Health Service, as well as the Health Care Financing Administration. David Satcher, the Assistant Secretary for Health, will play a key role in guiding the group's agenda.

Investors welcome new boss at British Biotech

[LONDON] British Biotech last week picked Christopher Hampson, a former director of Imperial Chemical Industries, to succeed John Raisman as non-executive chairman. The move was welcomed by investment analysts, one of whom described Hampson as "a solid, heavyweight industry figure".

Hampson acknowledged that he had had doubts about joining British Biotech. But "having met the people and understood their technology, I believe they have a technological lead. My challenge is to convert that into value for shareholders."

British Biotech shares fell following doubts about the efficacy of two drugs being developed by the company. Several senior staff have departed following a torrent of adverse publicity.

Modified maize escapes United Kingdom ban

[LONDON] The British government decided last week not to ban cultivation of a Novartis variety of genetically modified maize following advice from one of its scientific advisory committees.

Michael Meacher, the environment minister, had asked the committee on releases to the environment to assess a laboratory study showing that lacewing butterflies could be harmed when fed on prey that had eaten the maize. The maize has been modified to release an insecticide aimed at killing the corn borer pest.

The committee said in a report that the research was not sufficient to warrant a ban, particularly as a previous field-based study showed that the modified maize had "no measurable effects" on lacewings.

But the government may come under renewed pressure to bring in a moratorium on the commercialization of genetically modified crops following preliminary findings from the Rowett Research Institute of nutrition in Aberdeen, Scotland. These found that rats fed on modified potatoes suffer damage to their immune systems.

Gulf War syndrome 'not due to depleted uranium'

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Defense last week released a report concluding that it could find no evidence that depleted uranium caused or is causing the ill-defined collection of illnesses known as Gulf War syndrome.

"The bottom-line conclusion, based on a comprehensive review of available data and a science-based methodology, is that exposures to depleted uranium's heavy metal (chemical) toxicity or low-level radiation are not a cause of the undiagnosed illnesses afflicting some Gulf War veterans," the report says.

Depleted uranium is a by-product of the production of nuclear fuel or weapons.

Further evidence in trial over blood scandal

[TOKYO] A tape recording has revealed that Japanese government officials knew in 1983 that unheated blood products used to treat Japan's 5,000 haemophiliacs may have been tainted with HIV.

The tape was played last month during the trial of a former health ministry official charged with professional negligence for failing to order the withdrawal of contaminated blood products despite knowing the risks of HIV infection.

Some 1,800 haemophiliacs have contracted HIV through using the blood products (see *Nature* 379, 663; 1996).

Takeshi Abe, former vice-president of Teikyo University Medical School, who headed a government AIDS study panel, is heard on the tape saying that he feels as though he is injecting poison into his patients every day.

Rockefeller cash to bring fresh expertise to WHO

[MUNICH] The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Rockefeller Foundation have created a US\$2.5 million fund aimed at recruiting leading experts to the WHO.

The Global Health Leadership Fund is limited to two years and is designed to support reform of the WHO spearheaded by

Gro Harlem Brundtland, the organization's new president. Brundtland is keen to create partnerships with other United Nations agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and with the research community.

SOHO satellite could be out of action for weeks

[WASHINGTON] Ground controllers have re-established limited radio contact with the tumbling SOHO Sun-observing satellite, but say it could be weeks before they know whether the spacecraft can resume science operations.

Although SOHO answered a radio signal on 3 August after six weeks of silence, onboard power is still low. The hydrazine fuel that powers the satellite's thrusters is presumed frozen, leaving the spacecraft unable to turn its solar arrays towards the Sun to recharge its batteries.

Project managers still hope that power will be slowly restored as the orientation of the arrays changes over the next six weeks.

France gives go-ahead for collider tunnelling

[LONDON] France's prime minister Lionel Jospin has given the green light for construction work to begin on the Large Hadron Collider, a particle accelerator being built on the French-Swiss border. The Swiss authorities gave approval for tunnelling work to begin earlier this year.

French approval came after "a long and painstaking environmental impact study", according to the European Laboratory for Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva, which is building the collider.

Lewinsky controversy hits energy department

[WASHINGTON] The appointment of Bill Richardson as US energy secretary could be delayed again following newspaper allegations concerning the circumstances in which the former US ambassador offered a job to Monica Lewinsky, the celebrated former White House intern.

A newspaper alleged last week that Richardson created a junior public affairs position for Lewinsky at the United Nations in New York, after being encouraged to do so by the White House when Lewinsky's alleged relationship with President Bill Clinton first came under investigation. Lewinsky was offered the position, but turned it down.

At a hearing before the Senate Energy Committee, Richardson said the job already existed. The committee chairman has asked Clinton not to swear in Richardson until the allegation that he lied at the hearing has been investigated.