

Salk Institute vet wins \$4.7m damages for wrongful dismissal

[SAN DIEGO] A former veterinarian at the Salk Institute at La Jolla, California, who clashed with scientists there on animal research methods, was awarded \$4.7 million by a jury hearing her wrongful termination lawsuit (see *Nature* 394, 709; 1998).

Teresa J. Sylvina, the institute's veterinarian from 1990 to 1996, should get \$2.7 million in compensatory damages and \$2 million in punitive damages for being maliciously fired, the jury said.

Salk Institute officials, who contended Sylvina was fired for being a poor manager, said the verdict was not supported by the evidence. They intend to appeal. Institute attorneys will also seek to reduce the award. Sylvina, now at Tufts University in Boston, said: "Justice was served."

Call for powerful food safety watchdog in US

[WASHINGTON] The US food safety system should be consolidated under a single powerful authority headed by one individual, according to a report released last week by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council.

The report, "Ensuring Safe Food from Production to Consumption", also urges that the federal system be "science-based" and rid of archaic procedures such as the requirement that every chicken and cow carcass be visually inspected.

"Congress should change federal statutes so that inspection, enforcement and research efforts can be based on scientifically supportable assessments of risks to health," the institute says. It adds that the existing, fragmented regulatory structure, involving a dozen agencies, is ill-equipped to meet current challenges in ensuring food safety.

Zoology appointments spark protest in Italy

[MUNICH] A professor of zoology at the University of Pavia has lodged a formal complaint with the Italian research ministry about the results of the recent *concorso* (national competition) for 15 new associate professor positions in zoology.

Many of the posts were allocated to candidates with poor research records in preference to successful researchers, claims Carlo Redi, who is asking research minister Luigi Berlinguer to restart the competition.

Since he took office in 1995, Berlinguer has been trying to introduce more objective criteria into the Italian system of academic promotion, which has been much criticized for favouring personal connections (see

Nature 382, 7; 1996). After two years of political bickering, the Italian senate last month finally approved a watered down form of his new rules. But this came too late for the associate professor *concorsi*.

\$10m grants contest for interdisciplinary research

[WASHINGTON] One hundred academic institutions in the United States have been invited to submit proposals for a new grant programme in interdisciplinary research supported by the California-based David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

A total of \$10 million will be awarded next year, with a maximum single grant of \$1 million. The foundation says it is looking particularly for "novel alliances of disciplines and/or novel approaches to a problem", and will favour projects without funding from other sources. Participation in the programme is by invitation only "to reduce unproductive paperwork" and to increase the chances that a proposal will be funded, according to the foundation.

German universities win more freedom

[MUNICH] Roman Herzog, the German president, last week signed an amendment to the federal framework law on universities, the *Hochschulrahmengesetz*. This will introduce competitive elements to Germany's 325 universities, and give them more financial and administrative autonomy (see *Nature* 388, 820; 1997).

The law comes into effect only four weeks before the federal elections. It will end a two-year controversy over whether the amendment should have outlawed student fees, and whether the changes require the consent of the *Länder* (state) governments. Herzog signed without *Länder* approval.

But this may not be the end of the matter. The Social Democrat Party has announced its intention of proposing a further amendment, including a ban on student fees, if it wins the election. Some *Länder* are considering taking the matter to the constitutional courts to judge whether Herzog was within his rights to sign the amendment without their approval.

Scientists open graves from 1918 flu epidemic

[PARIS] An international team of scientists last weekend opened the Arctic graves of seven miners killed in 1918 by an epidemic of Spanish flu that claimed up to 40 million victims worldwide. The expedition, sponsored by the US National Institutes of Health and led by Kirsty Duncan, a Canadian, hopes to recover virus from the frozen corpses for research.

The team, backed up by the UK exhumation experts Necropolis, has set up extensive safety precautions at the cemetery at Longyearbyen, on the island of Spitzbergen, to prevent the virus escaping. But isolation units have been set up at the local hospital, just in case.

NASA's Big Bang probe on target despite fire

[WASHINGTON] A fire last week at the US space agency NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center in Greenbelt, Maryland, damaged parts of a satellite being built to investigate the faint radiation left over from the Big Bang. But the Microwave Anisotropy Probe, a successor to NASA's 1992 Cosmic Background Explorer satellite, is still expected to be launched in 2000 as planned.

The fire, which started in a compressor, resulted in smoke and water damage to a building in which protective coatings are applied to spacecraft parts. Panels scheduled to be installed on the Hubble Space Telescope in 2000 were also in the building, but were unharmed.

Chinese university buys mini-satellite from UK

[BEIJING] Tsinghua University in Beijing has signed a contract to purchase a £4.8 million (US\$7.8 million) mini-satellite from Surrey University in the United Kingdom. The acquisition is part of Tsinghua's plan to develop itself into a comprehensive research university and to establish a space science programme.

Tsinghua said its choice was based on Surrey's strong reputation for building mini-satellites. The experimental device will be used for communications and observations. Tsinghua will also set up a joint venture with Surrey to manufacture mini-satellites in China. An official signing ceremony will take place in October when Tony Blair, the British prime minister, visits China.

Britain's spies foiled plot to kidnap Niels Bohr

[LONDON] Britain's foreign intelligence agency, MI6, scotched a Soviet plan in 1945 to kidnap the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, according to files recently declassified by the Public Record Office in London.

The files show that intelligence officers obtained details of a plot that involved inviting Bohr to Bornholm, Denmark's easternmost island, where he was to be abducted with the help of Danish communists. Bohr was informed of the plan.

The Danish authorities put a watch on Bohr's house following a Danish intelligence report that uncaptured Nazi war criminals were trying to kill him.