

## NASA encounters biggest-ever Antarctic ozone hole

**Washington** The largest-ever Antarctic ozone 'hole' has been detected by the US space agency NASA. It measures 28.3 million square kilometres — or three times the size of the United States. The Antarctic ozone hole opens every year around September and October. The previous record size was seen two years ago, when the hole extended over 27.2 million square kilometres. This year's hole could continue to increase in size over the next month.

Ozone-destroying gases persist in the atmosphere. So although international agreements under the Montreal Protocol have curtailed their production, concentrations in the stratosphere are only now beginning to peak and it could be many decades before the hole is no longer an annual occurrence.

## Study suggests that France faces its own BSE epidemic

**Paris** Preliminary results of a French screening programme suggest that up to 1.5 in every 1,000 cattle in the country are contaminated with BSE. The agriculture ministry has tested 6,000 cattle in western France. Only those not destined for the table — that is, cattle found dead or sick — were tested; eight showed signs of BSE infection. Final results of the programme, which will extend to some 40,000 animals, will be issued in six months.

The rate of infection appears similar to that revealed by an earlier investigation in Switzerland. This also looked at animals entering slaughterhouses. The French newspaper *Le Figaro* estimates that 1,200 contaminated animals are consumed in France each year, despite attempts to curb the epidemic. The ministry disputes this figure, however.

## European Parliament condemns cloning

**Strasbourg** The European Parliament last week urged members of the British Parliament to reject a proposal by their government that they should revise legislation on embryo research to allow research into 'therapeutic cloning' using cell nuclear transfer (see *Nature* 406, 815; 2000).

After a debate in which one French member of the parliament had described the British proposal as "monstrous", and an Italian colleague as an "affront to civilization", the parliament approved by 237 votes to 230 a resolution which also demanded that the cloning of human embryos "at all stages of their development"

be outlawed throughout Europe. It also voted that such a ban should be included in the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights.

## Space station gears up for a life in science

**Washington** The first hands-on experiment to be conducted aboard the International Space Station has been launched by the space shuttle Atlantis, which docked with the station on 10 September.

Developed by scientists working at the



Good vibrations: MIT researchers display their apparatus to study movement in zero gravity.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Air Force Research Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the Middeck Active Control Experiment II (MACE II) will study the effects of vibrations in zero-gravity conditions. The goal is to improve the design of telescopes, robotic arms and other devices.

MACE II is expected to start in early November — when the first astronauts are due to arrive on the station. Bill Shepherd, the commander of the first crew, will have primary responsibility for running the experiment. Another experiment, on crystallized plasmas, is due to start at about the same time (see *Nature* 405, 7; 2000), but will not require such active astronaut involvement.

## Pay boost for UK medical researchers

**London** The UK Medical Research Council (MRC) has negotiated a large one-off pay supplement for its non-clinical researchers. Some 1,000 scientists are being offered a 9% supplement, to be staged over three years from 1 August 2000. The increase will come from the MRC's existing budget, but had to be approved by the government.

In addition, all council staff are being offered performance-related salary increases starting at 3.8% — well above the current rate of inflation. Union members will vote on the settlement on 24 September.

"We are very pleased," says George Radda, the MRC's chief executive. "I see this as recognition by the government that scientists in this country need to be

rewarded for their role." He hopes universities will now follow the MRC's lead.

## Genome summit will plot best path to the finish

**Washington** The leaders of the international effort to sequence the human genome are to meet in the Paris suburb of Evry tomorrow (15 September) to plot their strategy for 'finishing' the genome. Currently, only 25% of the sequence is in an accurate, assembled form.

Francis Collins, who as director of the US National Human Genome Research Institute heads the project, says that the scientists will try to ensure that no part of the sequence lags behind and that none are duplicated. The 'G-6' sequencing consortium is led by the United States and Britain, and includes Germany, France, Japan and China.

## Top Spanish science job goes to physicist

**Barcelona** Physicist Rolf Tarrach was last week named as the new president of Spain's Higher Council of Scientific Research (CSIC). The CSIC is the country's main research organization, and employs about 2,000 scientists in more than 100 institutes throughout the country. Tarrach, who is professor of physics at the University of Barcelona, will take over from the present director, César Nombela.

Tarrach is a vociferous critic of the way that universities operate and their lack of sufficient research funds. After his appointment was announced, he said that a high priority for CSIC should be to increase the recruitment of young postdoctoral researchers who had received training abroad. He also promised to promote closer collaboration between researchers in CSIC and the universities.

## US nuclear workers lacked protection and information

**Washington** A study released in Washington last week argues that the US government failed to give nuclear-weapons workers in the 1940s and 1950s adequate protection from high levels of radiation. It also says that managers at privately owned nuclear weapons plants deliberately misled employees about the dangers of their working conditions.

The study was carried out by the non-profit Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, and financed by the newspaper *USA Today*. It found that, contrary to assurances to workers that they did not face an unusual hazard, radiation levels within the plants routinely reached 500 times allowable limits. The institute is urging the US government to investigate the problem further, and provide free medical care to ageing former nuclear workers.