

US Senate could pull funding plug on laser project

Washington The future of the National Ignition Facility laser project at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California is hanging in the balance this week after the Department of Energy sent Congress a final estimate saying that the project could be completed by 2008 at a total cost of \$3.5 billion.

This estimate assumes that Congress will add an extra \$135 million to the \$74 million budgeted for the facility's construction during 2001. But the Senate is losing patience with the project's cost overruns: on 7 September it passed an amendment capping such expenditure at \$74 million and ordering a study from the National Academy of Sciences into the project's relevance to the nuclear weapons programme.

The project's backers will now push for the extra money when House and Senate appropriators confer on their final budget for the Department of Energy. If the money is not forthcoming, "the project is in serious jeopardy," says a senior department official.

African trials begin of DNA vaccine for malaria

London Clinical trials of DNA vaccines for malaria, developed by scientists at the University of Oxford's department of medicine, began in the Gambia this week. Up to now, malaria vaccines have failed to produce a strong enough immune response. Instead of using inactivated malaria parasites or protein, a DNA vaccine uses fragments of the parasite's DNA.

Trials in mice have shown that a combination of the DNA vaccine and a vaccine containing a modified vaccinia virus Ankara produced a strong cellular — rather than antibody — response. High levels of T cells destroy infected liver cells. Phase 1 trials have now begun, with human volunteers testing the vaccine combination's safety and immune response.

Party urges Mbeki to toe the line on AIDS

Cape Town South African president Thabo Mbeki is coming under pressure from within his own political party, the African National Congress (ANC), to acknowledge publicly that HIV causes AIDS. The demand is made in a paper from the ANC's health committee that was leaked to the press, and comes shortly before Mbeki is due to receive a report on the proceedings of a panel set up earlier this year to look at the link between HIV and AIDS (see *Nature* 405, 105–106; 2000).

"The government's questioning of the link between HIV and AIDS is crippling the

campaign to combat the scourge," the weekly newspaper *The Mail and Guardian* wrote in an editorial last week. It further warned that either he "gets his act together on HIV/AIDS very soon or he places his presidency at risk".

Congress set to give NSF substantial budget hike

Washington The National Science Foundation (NSF) is heading for a substantial budget increase — although perhaps not as substantial as the record 17% hike proposed by President Bill Clinton's administration back in February — after the Senate approved a 10% increase last week that would take the agency's 2001 budget to \$4.3 billion.

Before a budget bill is sent to Clinton, the Senate must reconcile its proposal with the 4% increase approved by the House of Representatives for the agency in July. However, NSF supporters in both houses have said that more money should go to the agency if, as is likely, extra money becomes available from the appropriations bill, of which its budget is part, during late budget negotiations with the president.

Israeli fund will aid women researchers

Jersusalem The Hebrew University of Jerusalem has boosted prospects for women scientists with a US\$2 million fellowship fund that will give promising PhD candidates in the natural sciences US\$20,000 a year for three years. The fund has been set up by Dan Maydan, president of Applied Materials of Santa Clara, California, in memory of his wife, Dalia, a physical chemist who trained at the Hebrew University.

Maydan believes it is vital to encourage more women to go into science and technology, especially given the shortage of trained professionals in those fields in Israel. "I know very well the struggle women have to raise a family and pursue a scientific career," he said. Of the three recipients of the fund's first round of fellowships last week, one is a mother and another is pregnant.

Researcher in discrimination case settles with university

Montreal Kin-Yip Chun, the former research associate who has fought the University of Toronto for more than six years over allegations of racial discrimination, has reached an agreement with the university enabling him to return to seismological research (see *Nature* 397, 551; 1999).

The agreement follows a decision by the Ontario Human Rights Commission in July not to refer Chun's complaint to a board of inquiry. Chun will receive the title of research scientist and non-tenure track associate professor, start-up research funds, and the

right to teach and supervise graduate students and to compete for tenure-track positions.

Anthropology journal slashes prices

Paris Wiley-Liss, the publishers of the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, has agreed to cut the journal's annual subscription rate from US\$2,085 to US\$1,390 after negotiations with the American Association of Physical Anthropologists (AAPA). A second institutional subscription will be offered at 20% of the full rate, and the AAPA editorial office will also get more support.

"There's a very dramatic change going on in academic publishing," says Jonathan Friedlaender, professor of anthropology at Temple University, Philadelphia, and chairman of the AAPA's publications committee. "The era of very high charges is going to end either with cuts in prices like ours, or with many new competing journals owned by associations themselves."

Proteins, virus and Brenner scoop Lasker awards

Washington Aaron Ciechanover and Avram Hershko, of Technion in Haifa, Israel, and Alexander Varshavsky of the California Institute of Technology, have won this year's Lasker prize for basic medical research for their discovery of the ubiquitin system of protein degradation. The prizes will be awarded in New York tomorrow (22 September).

The award for clinical medical research goes to Harvey Alter, of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, and Michael Houghton, of the Chiron Corporation in Emeryville, California, for their work leading to the discovery of the virus that causes hepatitis C and the development of blood-screening methods



Brenner: lifetime achievement award.

that have virtually eliminated the virus from the US blood supply.

The Lasker awards are often a pointer to the Nobel prizes. This year, Sydney Brenner, of the Molecular Sciences Institute in Berkeley, California — who has yet to win a Nobel despite a widespread belief that he should have done so — will receive the Lasker Award for Special Achievement in Medical Science. The Lasker Foundation acknowledges his "brilliant creativity in biomedical sciences" as well as his "rational voice" in the debate on recombinant DNA and his "trenchant wit".