

Württemberg and Niedersachsen, have smaller programmes of their own.

The upsurge in funding has raised eyebrows among health researchers specializing in more common diseases. The human TSE — variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (vCJD) — has so far claimed only around 100 victims, none of them in Germany.

“CJD is not a big health hazard, but it is worth funding generously,” says Kretzschmar. This is not just because it raises hopes of curing a rare disease, he argues, but also because it feeds into research on neurodegenerative diseases generally, which usually involve amyloid proteins. “The only difference between these diseases and diseases such as Alzheimer’s is that TSEs are transmissible,” he says.

One of the Bavarian projects involves screening chemical libraries for their ability to prevent prion proteins from aggregating, using a new screen that tracks the diffusion time of a single fluorescently tagged prion molecule. This work will be done by academics because, says Kretzschmar, “the pharmaceutical industry is not interested in finding cures for vCJD because it is so rare”.

Another project is to create genetically modified cattle that lack the gene for the prion protein PrP, and which therefore cannot contract BSE. ■



Hans Kretzschmar says prion research is worthwhile.

Medical journals seek means to free authors from industry

Paul Smaglik, Washington

Several leading medical journals are planning a new publishing policy designed to empower academic authors who collaborate with industry.

Aimed at authors who work with drug companies on clinical trials, the policy should help academics retain full control of the content and timing of research results produced in industrial collaborations.

Critics contend that drug companies can exert excessive influence over the publication of work that they have paid for, potentially suppressing negative results, for example.

The journals — including the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, the *New England Journal of Medicine* and *The Lancet* — will announce the joint policy in mid-September. They are expected to reject reports from trials sponsored by drug companies unless the authors have been granted explicit control over the data and the decision to publish.

In an interview with *Nature*, Jeffrey Drazen, editor-in-chief of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, was tight-lipped about the details of the policy, whose existence was reported in the *Washington Post* on 5 August. But he was less coy about the circumstances that prompted the editors to develop it.

“Academic investigators have had less and less opportunities to work with pharmaceutical sponsors with respect to study design,

data analysis and interpretation, and manuscript drafting,” he says. “They’re given a ‘take it or leave it’ stance.”

The new policy is intended to help academic investigators negotiate more favourable terms with companies, Drazen says. As companies seek the endorsement that publication of a positive trial in a journal implies, they may be willing to give more freedom to their academic collaborator.

George Lundberg, editor-in-chief of online medical journal Medscape, says that the policy’s overall goals are “praiseworthy”. But he is unsure how effective it will be in helping journals establish more editorial independence. “The devil will be in the details,” he says.

For example, Lundberg wonders how far any policy where authors have to pledge their independence can be extended, and whether authors will be expected to vouch for their full independence from their universities and granting agencies as well.

News of the policy attracted a mixed reception. A spokesperson for the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America questions whether the policy is necessary. But the New York-based Citizens for Responsible Care & Research, a consumer group that has been critical of medical research conduct, says that it supports the policy’s ends, but doubts that it will contain the means to achieve them. ■

Golf course threatens to leave hole in fossil records

Rex Dalton, San Diego

A planned golf course outside Denver, Colorado, could swallow up a valuable dinosaur track site that includes the world’s only known tracks of a species from 65 million years ago, palaeontologists say.

According to the plans, some of the tracks are to be covered with dirt, and some cut out of their stone and removed for display elsewhere. Others would be preserved *in situ* amid the fairways and greens of the proposed municipal course in the small town of Golden in the Rocky Mountains.

But the plans have met with fierce opposition from geologists and palaeontologists. William Caneer, a retired geologist from the Colorado School of Mines, says: “Palaeontologists spend half their lives digging specimens up; now the city wants to cover tracks with dirt. It makes smoke come out of my ears.”



Rough justice? Many of the fossils at Golden could be covered over by fairways and greens.

Colorado’s state archaeologist, Susan Collins, has requested a survey of the palaeontology specimens at the site known as the Parfet clay pits, a former clay mine on the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains.

Collins says her agency will determine what can be done with the track site after the

survey is complete. But she has not ruled out accepting the plan for the golf course.

Once a waste dump for coal-plant ash, and broken bottles from the nearby Coors Brewery, the privately owned clay pits — recently donated to the city of Golden — were for years the domain of amateur rock hunters, who cut out tracks with high-powered rock saws.

Around 1985, Martin Lockley, a geologist at the University of Colorado at Denver, and colleagues found in the pits the first ever identified tracks of a ceratopsian, along with the only known US track of the crocodile-like champsosaur. Golden has contracted Lockley to assist in preserving the tracks during construction of the golf course.

Lockley, who curates the world’s largest dinosaur-track collection at his university, says the course could incorporate the history of the site by including appropriate displays of the tracks. ■