

US reiterates right to keep smallpox virus for research

Washington Stocks of live smallpox virus held at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, should be preserved to allow research into better treatments and vaccines, the US government said last week. The Department of Health and Human Services said it wants to keep stores of the virus "until adequate medical tools are available to counter any future outbreak".

The CDC is one of only two centres known to have a stock of the smallpox virus, the other being the State Research Centre of Virology and Biotechnology in Koltsovo in central Russia. The World Health Assembly — the governing body of the World Health Organization — decided in 1996 to destroy both stocks, but agreed to a temporary retention in 1999 when the United States said that further research on the live virus was necessary (see *Nature* 398, 741; 1999). The assembly will discuss the fate of both stocks at next year's annual meeting.

Johns Hopkins admits drug misdemeanour in Indian trial

New Delhi Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, has admitted that one of its scientists tested experimental cancer drugs on patients in India without proper federal or university approval, and without adequate preliminary tests in animals. The researcher has been barred from serving as principal investigator on future projects involving human subjects.

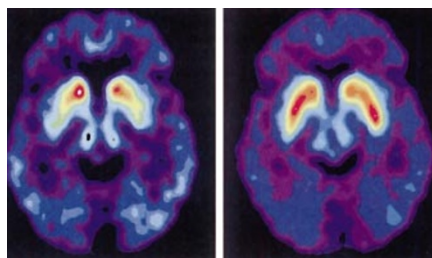
The action follows an internal investigation into an oral cancer drug trial, involving Johns Hopkins researchers, at the Regional Cancer Centre in the Indian state of Kerala between November 1999 and April 2000 (see *Nature* 412, 466; 2001).

Johns Hopkins has now confirmed that one of the drugs had not been cleared by either the university or the US Food and Drug Administration. But it found no evidence that any patient had been harmed or that conventional treatments were delayed. The Indian health ministry has already ordered the centre to suspend all clinical trials and to reconstitute its ethical committee.

Riddle of Parkinson's side effects solved

San Diego Prospects for using of grafts of fetal tissue to treat patients with Parkinson's disease look brighter now that researchers can explain the distressing side effects reported this year in a clinical trial.

In March, Curt Freed of the University of Colorado in Denver and his colleagues



Brain wave: transplanting fetal tissue (right) boosts dopamine release in Parkinson's patients.

published a clinical trial in which 20 Parkinson's patients received transplants of human fetal tissue to replace cells in an area of the brain called the putamen (*The New England Journal of Medicine* 344, 710–719; 2001). Cells in this area release the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is deficient in Parkinson's patients. Most treated patients aged under 60 showed significant improvement, but some were left with intractable movement disorders (see *Nature* 410, 401; 2001).

Follow-up studies reported at last week's annual Society for Neuroscience meeting in San Diego indicate that the side effects are due to large numbers of cells being implanted into areas where dopamine function was still intact. Using brain imaging to target the transplants to areas with the greatest loss of dopamine should reduce side effects, say the scientists.

Parliament amends plans for Framework funding

Munich The European Parliament has put forward a raft of changes to the proposed sixth European Framework Programme for Research, which will run from 2002 to 2006.

The parliament last week suggested 334 changes to the 17.5-billion-euro (US\$15 billion) programme. It said that infrastructure funding should be halved to 475 million euros, while giving fusion research a provisional increase of 100 million euros. The parliament also recommended that more emphasis be placed on diseases such as malaria and AIDS, rather than newer fields such as genomics. Funds can also be used for research using human embryonic stem cells, the parliament said, as long as the research is in line with the legislation of the member states involved.

The European Commission will draft a revised version of the programme before the council of European research ministers meets again in December.

Courts blame 'slow' government for CJD

Tokyo Two district courts have found that the Japanese government and two biomedical companies could have acted earlier to prevent brain-surgery patients in Japan contracting Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD).

Seventy-six patients are known to have contracted CJD in Japan between 1979 and 1997 after receiving grafts of brain tissue imported from Germany. In two lawsuits brought by relatives of 28 of the patients, the courts found that the medical services companies that supplied the tissues — B. Braun of Melsungen, Germany, and Nihon BSS of Tokyo — should have known of the risk. The courts also found that Japan's health ministry should have acted earlier — it did not recall the tissue until 1997, a decade after the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention banned its use.

The courts said that the companies should reach a settlement with the families, but did not specify how much compensation should be paid. The families are seeking a combined total of 2.9 billion yen (US\$23.5 million).

Weizmann picks plant man as next president



Jerusalem Ilan Chet, an agricultural scientist specializing in the biological control of plant diseases, has been elected president of the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot. Chet recently completed a ten-year stint as the vice-president for research and development at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Chet was founding director of the Hebrew University's Otto Warburg Minerva Center for Agricultural Biotechnology, and served for three years as the university's dean of agriculture. He has been a vigorous promoter of joint projects between researchers in Israel and overseas, fostering cooperation that generated new sources of funding for Israeli scientists. Chet replaces physicist Haim Harari, who had been in the post for 13 years.

Women close gap but it's still a man's world

Washington Female scientists have increased their representation in the US scientific community, but still lag behind their male colleagues in attaining full-time, tenure-track positions, according to a report by the US National Academy of Sciences. Women had almost no representation in the community 25 years ago, but in 1995 they accounted for around a third of new science PhDs and academic faculty in many fields, though there is wide variation.

In engineering just 7% of degrees and 5% of PhD-level jobs in 1995 went to women, whereas in the biological sciences female scientists were awarded 50% of all undergraduate degrees and 40% of all PhDs.

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