

But it has not taken a position on whether the cloning of human embryos for research purposes should be outlawed. Last September the federation adopted a voluntary moratorium on human cloning (see *Nature* 389, 319; 1997).

In a separate move, 55 medical and patient advocacy groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Association for Cancer Research and the American College of Medical Genetics, have written to members of Congress asking that any legislation should do "no harm to biomedical research".

## British drugs companies in mega-merger plan

[LONDON] The British-based pharmaceutical companies GlaxoWellcome and SmithKline Beecham have announced plans to merge, creating what the two companies describe in a joint statement as "the largest research and development organization in the global healthcare industry".

The new company — expected to be called Glaxo SmithKline — will have a market value of more than £100 billion (US\$150 billion), and a combined worldwide workforce of 110,000. But heavy job losses are expected, particularly among scientists working in areas of research where the two companies' efforts overlap.

## Green light for sales of leprosy vaccine in India

[NEW DELHI] The Indian government has authorized the sale of what is claimed to be the world's first leprosy vaccine. It took two decades to develop, and will be made by Cadilla Pharmaceuticals of Ahmadabad. No major side effects were noticed after clinical trials using 80,000 doses.

India has 60 per cent of the world's 1.15 million leprosy cases. Treatment usually entails a three-year course of multiple drugs, with varied results. A course of treatment with the vaccine will last between six months and a year, and will cost US\$1.25. The vaccine will be available from June.

## Challenge ahead for boss of Euro research centre

[AMSTERDAM] Herbert Allgeier has been nominated as the new director-general of the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC), which comprises seven institutes in Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Spain. Allgeier, an engineer, currently directs the commission's advanced communication technology programme and coordinates its air and space activities, a position he will retain.

In his new appointment, announced last week, Allgeier will have to respond to

increasing pressure, particularly from the European Parliament, to reorganize the way in which the JRC's institutes are run and to increase the quantity and quality of their scientific output.

## Setting sail to study underwater volcano

[SEATTLE] Oregon State University is to send a research ship to investigate an underwater volcano, Axial Seamount, that has been erupting off the Oregon coast for the past week. Chris Fox, a geologist with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, says the eruption has not been seen. But he says it is likely that rivers of red-hot lava are flowing out of the volcano, along with giant plumes of scalding, mineral-rich water carrying microbes that thrive beneath the ocean floor. The volcano is 4,500 feet high. Its peak is nearly 4,000 feet below the ocean surface.

## Correction

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