

## BSE diagnosed 'more than a year before government warning'

[LONDON] The first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) was identified 14 months before the United Kingdom government's official announcement, according to the government pathologist who made the initial diagnosis.

Carol Richardson, a pathologist at the Central Veterinary Laboratory, told BBC television that she had identified "bovine scrapie" as the cause of death in a cow in September 1985. Despite agreeing with this diagnosis, a senior colleague attributed the death to poisoning, and failed to mention the case when reporting BSE symptoms in British cattle a year later.

Scientists at the government's neuropathogenesis laboratory in Edinburgh did not receive brain samples for testing until one year after the official announcement in November 1986.

## French companies help to wire up schools

[PARIS] France is to work with computer and telephone companies to reinforce the use of the Internet and multimedia in education.

Claude Allègre, the country's minister of national education, research and technology, last week announced a series of agreements with such companies, developing a theme that emerged as the top priority in government plans, outlined last month by prime minister Lionel Jospin, to boost Internet use in France.

The flurry of deals, details of which have not yet been released, would associate the ministry with the company Alcatel for work on experimental high-speed networks, with Lotus for software for resource-sharing among groups and with Lyonnais Cable for providing cable access to schools.

Allègre said another series of agreements would be announced shortly with publishers to develop scientific and teaching materials for the national education system.

## US lab 'invaded privacy' with genetics tests

[WASHINGTON] A court in the United States has ruled that a federal laboratory may have unconstitutionally invaded the privacy of employees over genetics tests carried out without their permission. The ruling, made by a regional appeals court last week, concerned seven employees who had sued the US Department of Energy's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California. A lower court had earlier backed claims by

the laboratory that it was within its rights in testing, without permission, blood and urine samples taken from the employees before they were employed. But, in a unanimous decision, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals overruled this interpretation and ruled in favour of the claimants — a move that appears to support demands by Vice-President Al Gore two weeks ago for legislation banning genetic discrimination in the workplace (see *Nature* 391, 429; 1998).

## Hungary switches dam project back on again

[LONDON] Hungary last week revived a joint hydroelectric project on the Danube with Slovakia that it had originally agreed to 20 years ago. The Hungarian government, which had abandoned the project in 1992 under pressure from environmentalist groups, agreed in principle to complete a \$1 billion dam north of Budapest. Czechoslovakia, as it then was, completed its side of the project in 1993.

The two sides remained deadlocked for many years over Hungary's refusal to complete its share. Last year, the International Court in the Hague ordered the two sides to work out a solution that took environmental factors into account. Environment groups have accused the Hungarian government of ignoring the

international court's decision to give priority to the environmental impact of the dam project.

## Indian election pledge on nuclear missiles

[NEW DELHI] India's largest opposition political party says it plans to make India an overt nuclear and missile power if it takes office after this month's elections. The election manifesto of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) promises to strengthen national security by building nuclear weapons and deploying the home-made surface-to-surface missile Prithvi and the intermediate range ballistic missile Agni.

Of the Indian parliament's 544 seats, 379 are being contested by BJP and the rest by its allies in the coming elections. Although BJP cannot achieve a majority, political observers say its chances of forming a government with the help of its allies are good. The party's scientific agenda is drawn up by physicist M. G. K. Menon, a fellow of Britain's Royal Society, who joined BJP last month.

## Call for UK policy review on plutonium stocks

[LONDON] Scientists in the United Kingdom have expressed concern that the country lacks a policy to deal with its stocks of 'civil

plutonium — plutonium that has been separated from reprocessed spent fuel from nuclear power stations. The Royal Society, in a report produced by a working group chaired by Sir Ronald Mason, a former chief scientist at the Ministry of Defence, urges the UK government to take steps to remedy the situation.

**The report calls on the government to commission an expert review to manage the stocks. Britain currently has 54 tonnes of civil plutonium, and the stockpile is forecast to reach 100 tonnes by 2010.**

## Revolt in US Senate over Surgeon General's post

[WASHINGTON] Efforts by conservative Republican senators in the United States to block David Satcher's nomination for the position of Surgeon General were due to be put to the test on Tuesday (10 February), when the full Senate was scheduled to vote on the nomination.

President Bill Clinton's nomination of Satcher, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has been opposed by conservative Republicans led by Senator John Ashcroft (Republican, Missouri), a presidential aspirant. These Republicans criticize both Satcher's failure to oppose a particular kind of late-term abortion, and his defence of the use of

placebo in government-funded trials of the anti-AIDS drug AZT in pregnant women in Africa and Asia (see *Nature* 387, 225; 1997). The post of Surgeon General has been vacant for three years.

The American Medical Association has endorsed Satcher, as has Senator Bill Frist (Republican, Tennessee), who is a medical doctor, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Ashcroft, in a recent Senate speech, said that "Satcher's confirmation would reject America at her highest and best" and would endorse values "far beneath what the American people endorse".

## Scientists put their weight behind the Gaia theory

[LONDON] Scientists met in London on Monday to launch the Gaia Society, a scientific association that aims to "promote the study of the Earth as an inter-connected living system".

The Gaia theory, which suggests that the Earth functions as a self-regulating 'superorganism', was popularized by James Lovelock, honorary visiting fellow at Green College, University of Oxford, and he is one of the scientists involved in the society. Others include Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University and Sir Crispin Tickell, chancellor of the University of Kent.