EC group seeks ban on non-medical uses of prenatal screening

Paris. The group that advises the European Commission on ethical issues related to biotechnology last week recommended that the use of prenatal diagnosis (PND) should be restricted to "precise medical indications", and that its use to select sex or other "non-medical characteristics" should be prohibited.

Indeed, the group recommends that such techniques should be restricted to licensed medical centres, irrespective of whether improvements in the simplicity of tests allow them to be offered more widely. The logic of this recommendation is that PND may often reveal information that will require women and couples to take difficult decisions, in particular whether or not to abort a fetus.

In practice, the group recommends that the member states of the European Union should operate PND broadly along the lines on which it is now carried out in the United Kingdom and France, with the emphasis on the licensing of approved centres and on the regular evaluation of the quality of services offered by such centres, in particular in terms of individual genetic counselling and codes of professional practice. □

Ocean programme formally launched

Tokyo. US, Chinese and German scientists signed a memorandum of understanding on Monday (26 February) agreeing to launch a new international programme to drill deep holes in the continental crust. The memorandum was signed at the German embassy in Tokyo by Rolf Emmermann, scientific executive director of the Geoforschungszentrum Potsdam (GFZ) of Germany, Min Zhi, deputy director general of the department of international cooperation of China's Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources, and Robert Corell, assistant director of the US National Science Foundation. It covers the implementation, management and operation of the International Continental Scientific Drilling Program (ICDP).

Scientists from Japan and other countries have also expressed a strong interest in joining, according to ICDP organizers. The aim of the project is to use "the unique capacities of scientific drilling to provide exact, fundamental and globally significant knowledge of the composition, structure and processes of the Earth's crust". ICDP will support drilling costs of selected projects. □

Fusion finds friends in Congress

Washington. Fifty congressmen, including some influential Republicans, have joined the Fusion Energy Advisory Committee (FEAC) in calling for funding for fusion research to be raised next year to $275 million. The Congressmen wrote to Hazel O'Leary, the energy secretary, and Jack Gibbons, President Clinton's science advisor, asking for the money to be included in the 1997 budget, to be published on 18 March.

But the fusion community, which saw its budget crash from $370 million to $244 million this year, faces an uphill battle: Robert Walker (Republican, Pennsylvania), chair of the House science committee, thinks it deserves just $225 million. □

Heaviest element goes nameless

Munich. Scientists at the National Centre for Heavy Ion Research (GSI), in Darmstadt, Germany, announced last week that they had created the heaviest element so far. Element 112 has an atomic mass of 277, contains 165 neutrons and has a half-life of 240 microseconds.

The group will not be suggesting a name for the new element, the sixth they have discovered, until the International Union for Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC) approves their right to name element 108, which they wished to call hassium after the Latin name, Hassia, of the Darmstadt region. A decision from IUPAC about who has the right to name elements is expected in June (see *Nature* **372,** 306; 1994). □