

Anticancer drugs to gain speedier approval in United States

Washington. President Bill Clinton last week announced a new policy intended to speed up the approval of anti-cancer drugs, as Republicans in Congress pushed ahead with legislation to expedite the US drug approval process.

Clinton announced that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will no longer require anticancer drugs to demonstrate increased patient survival time or quality of life before going to market. Instead, new drugs will need to show only tumour shrinkage for market approval. But companies will still have to complete studies showing long-term effectiveness once a drug is on the market.

The administration estimated that at least 100 of more than 200 anti-cancer drugs now being developed in the United States could have their approval times shortened under the new rules.

The FDA also announced that it will begin soliciting applications from makers of experimental cancer drugs that have been approved abroad, but not in the United States, for use in programmes that speed drugs to patients with life-threatening illnesses. □

Breast cancer test 'premature'

Washington. A private institute in Fairfax, Virginia, is offering a genetic test for a mutation of the *BRCA1* gene, which is linked to hereditary breast cancer. This is despite the view of leading geneticists that such tests are not yet ready for public use.

The Genetics and IVF Institute is selling the test, which detects a particular mutation known to be linked to breast cancer in Jewish women, for \$295. Geneticists involved in work on the so-called breast cancer gene had agreed not to make testing available until they knew more about how to interpret test results. □

Clearance sought for abortion drug

Washington. The Population Council, the group which holds US patent rights to the French abortion drug RU-486, has filed an application to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for approval of its use. The council also says that it has given manufacturing and distribution rights for the controversial drug to a new company, Advances in Health Technology.

The FDA, which normally takes 6 to 12 months to process such applications, has faced criticism from Republicans in Congress for the delay of its approval process. The agency can now expect to come under attack from them if it approves the use of RU-486. □

Agricultural scientists go on strike

Sydney. Staff at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization's Division of Agricultural Research in Australia held a half-day strike last week in protest about expected job losses. The stoppage is only the third such strike in the organization's 70-year history. But the largely symbolic gesture may do little to stop one-third of the division's 280 staff and one of its two major sites closing down completely to bring costs back within the division's \$A13-million (US\$10-million) budget.

Oliver Mayo, the division chief, said he had considerable "sympathy" with the staff's position, but something needed to be done quickly to improve the division's poor financial state. Hard times in Australia's agriculture industry have caused the division's support from industry to dry up, while the government is keen to place greater emphasis on manufacturing research. □

Internet index of species launched

Manila. *Species 2000*, a worldwide initiative to create an Internet-based index of the world's known species, began last month in Manila, Philippines. The index will consist of a series of databases

covering each major group of organisms and will enable users to verify the scientific name, status and classification of every known species of plant, animal, fungus and micro-organism. The service will be made available as part of the Clearing House Mechanism under the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. □

Israel signs up to EU research

Brussels. Israel has become the first non-European country to participate in all non-nuclear research programmes funded by the European Union (EU). In return, European researchers will be given access to Israeli projects and results in reciprocal areas of cooperation. Under an agreement signed between Israel and the EU last week, Israeli research organizations and enterprises will participate in the 16 research programmes of the Fourth Framework Programme. Israel will contribute ECU30 million (US\$38.5 million) per year toward the Fourth Framework budget. □

UK research spending increases

London. Britain's total spending on research and development (R&D) increased by 3.7 per cent in real terms between 1993 and 1994 to a total of £14.6 billion, representing the steepest increase since the mid-1980s, according to figures released last week by the Central Statistical Office.

R&D in universities expanded particularly significantly, growing from £2.3 billion in 1993 to £2.6 billion. That carried out by private companies increased from £9.1 to £9.4 billion. Ironically, however, the strength of Britain's economy meant that expenditure on R&D as a proportion of gross domestic product fell from 2.20 to 2.19 per cent, a figure that compares to a peak of 2.29 per cent in 1986. □

Children think better to pop music

London. Listening to pop music appears to enhance reasoning skills more than other sounds such as Mozart and ordinary conversation, according to an experiment involving 11,000 children from 250 UK schools as part of *The Daily Telegraph's* Megalab experiment.

Groups of children were randomly divided into three groups: one listened to a Mozart quintet on the radio, another heard pop music and a third listened to speech. After a series of 'spatial reasoning tasks' at the end, the pop music group scored the highest marks.

The results may not be music to the ears of researchers at the University of California, Irvine, who have suggested that listening to Mozart improved spatial reasoning (see *Nature* 365, 611; 1993). □

Limits of lasers and stained glass

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Munich. Scientists and art historians restoring stained glass windows in churches in industrial east Germany have shown that newly developed laser techniques are less effective than traditional methods of hand restoration. Glasswork there has suffered from neglect, natural ageing and decades of severe air pollution. The picture above shows a nineteenth century window in Spremberg, Saxony, before (left) and after (right) restoration. □