

Approval closer for RU-486

Washington. An advisory committee to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has concluded that the abortion-inducing drug RU-486, known in the United States as mifepristone, is safe and effective, and recommended that it be approved for marketing.

Although the recommendation of the eight-member panel — known as the Reproductive Health Drugs Advisory Committee — is not binding on the FDA, such decisions are rarely ignored. David Kessler, the FDA's Commissioner, said the panel had issued "a very strong signal". A final decision is expected in September. □

Staff 'negligent' over CJD risk

London. Officials and staff from Britain's Department of Health and the Medical Research Council (MRC) were negligent in not responding adequately to warnings about the risk of contracting Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease from human growth hormone in experimental treatments during the 1970s, the High Court ruled last Friday.

Having been alerted to the possibility of transmission, the department and the MRC failed to pass on the information to clinicians treating patients for dwarfism, and should have ended the programme before 1 July 1977. The MRC expressed its "deepest sympathy" for the families of the eight patients who died, and the many who may still develop the disease, but did comment on the verdict. □

German institutes face closure

Munich. Three of Germany's 83 'blue-list' institutes — the Research Institute for Child Nutrition in Dortmund, the Medical Institute of Environmental Hygiene in Düsseldorf, and the Institute for Scientific Film in Göttingen — face closure, following a recommendation from the Wissenschaftsrat, Germany's science council, that their funding be withdrawn.

Earlier this month, the Wissenschaftsrat, which is responsible for reviewing the research activities of all blue-list institutes, published reports on nine of them. It said that the three did not comply with the appropriate "scientific and political criteria", while the other six institutes covered received positive reviews. □

Clinton names bioethics head

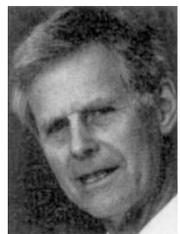
Washington. President Clinton last week named Harold T. Shapiro, the president of Princeton University, to chair a new 15-member National Bioethics Advisory Commission, which will be concerned with ethical issues arising from experiments involving human biology and behaviour. First among the topics it is mandated to consider are protection for human research subjects and the use and management of genetic information, including gene patenting issues.

The commission includes experts in medicine, religion, psychology, public health and law, as well as lay people. Shapiro is a professor of economics and public affairs. The panel is intended to address broad principles, to guide federal agencies, to hold hearings, to lead inquiries and to issue recommendations. □

New director for Newton Institute

London. Keith Moffatt, (right) professor of mathematical physics at the Department of Applied Mathematics and Theoretical Physics at the University of Cambridge, has been appointed the new director of the university's Isaac Newton Institute for Mathematical Sciences.

Moffatt takes over from Sir Michael Atiyah, recently-retired president of the Royal Society. A specialist in fluid dynamics, he has been closely involved with the institute since its formation in 1990 and as a member of its management committee. □



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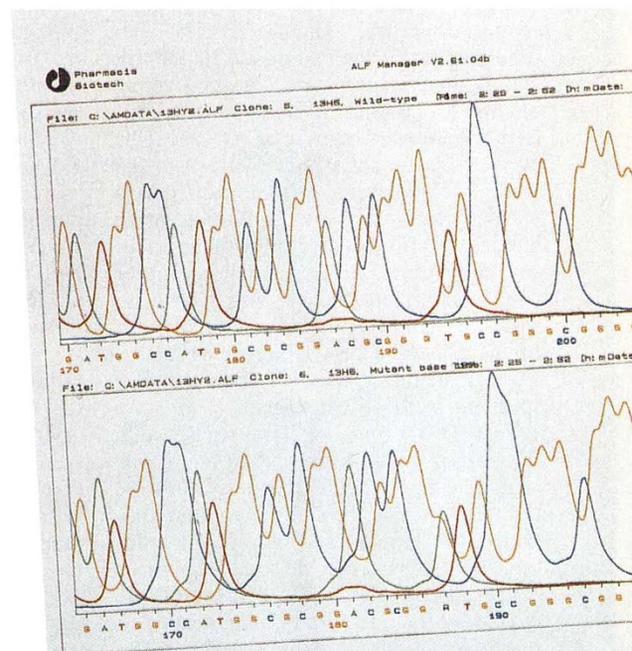
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The p53 gene from 316 breast cancer patients was sequenced using ALF automated sequencing technology. (Bergh J., Norberg T., Sjogren, S., Lindgren A., Holmberg, L. "Complete Sequencing of the p53 Gene..." *Nature Medicine* 1995; 10:1029-1034.)

