

UK revamps genetic engineering panel to focus on policy

London. Growing confidence in genetic engineering has led to the slimming-down of a UK government advisory committee on the safety of the 'contained use' of genetically modified organisms. Derek Burke, former vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia, and a member of the outgoing committee, says it has proved "a real British success", but changes had become necessary as it had become concerned more with regulatory matters than with science.

For the past 12 years, the Advisory Committee on Genetic Modification (ACGM) had consisted of 19 relevant experts made up of the scientific and public policy communities. The new ACGM has 13 members, who will now focus on "strategic policy issues".

A separate 12-member subcommittee will report to the main committee on scientific and technical matters. Alison Spalding, secretary of the ACGM, says science and policy had been split up to achieve greater efficiency and to focus appropriate expertise on science and regulatory matters.

Kay Davies, professor of genetics at the University of Oxford (pictured left), is the ACGM's new chair. □

James King-Holmes

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Clean-up 'needs more data'

Washington. The US government needs more information on new clean-up technologies, health and environmental effects of nuclear waste, and future land use, before it can decide how best to clean up the Hanford nuclear waste site in Washington state, according to a report from the National Research Council, the operating arm of

the US National Academy of Sciences, which was released this week.

"Instead of choosing one plan now, based on limited information, the federal government should adopt a phased decision strategy," says Thomas Leschine of the University of Washington in Seattle. He suggests delaying some remedial work until there has been more research. According to the report, a recent environmental impact study sponsored jointly by the energy department and the state of Washington considered only the waste inside Hanford's holding tanks, and not the tanks themselves, or waste that has already leaked into the ground. □

DNA test used in murder case

Washington. Evidence from a mitochondrial DNA test has helped to convict a man who raped and then murdered a 4-year-old girl in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in what is reported to be the first use of such a test in legal proceedings. Twenty-seven-year-old Paul Ware was found guilty of the murder of Lindsey Green, killed in 1994. Mitochondrial DNA was used from hair found at the scene of the crime to match that from Ware. Mitochondrial DNA can be detected in hair, bones or teeth; unlike other DNA, it is found in the fluid outside the nucleus of the cell, and carries its own genetic code. □

Scientists back Indian patent bill

New Delhi. India's scientists are lending support to a new bill on patents, which the government proposes to introduce in the parliament session that began earlier this month. Among other things, the legislation will allow patenting of plant varieties, man-made micro-organisms, and gene sequences yielding new products.

A group of leading biologists, meeting recently under the umbrella of the Indian National Science Academy has voiced concern over the delay in amending the 1970 Act, as India has promised to do to qualify for membership of the World Trade Organization.

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