

AIDS researcher loses libel fight against French newspaper

Paris. Robert Gallo, the US AIDS researcher, has lost a battle against the newspaper *Le Monde* in the French Supreme Court of Appeal. The court threw out charges of libel and slander brought against the newspaper and its journalist Frank Nouchi in connection with articles written by Nouchi in 1991 on the dispute between Gallo and Luc Montagnier of the Institut Pasteur over claims on the discovery of the AIDS virus.

Nouchi based his articles on a draft report by the US National Institutes of Health's Office of Scientific Integrity that had been revealed by the *Chicago Tribune*. Nouchi's articles alleged that Gallo had censored his assistant Mikulas Popovic, and in so doing "contradicted the most elementary rules of scientific communication", and that he had used the virus discovered by Montagnier to develop the US AIDS test.

The court said that Nouchi had carried out a "serious and profound enquiry" into the Gallo/Montagnier dispute over the years, and had made every effort to corroborate the draft report's findings. The court ordered Gallo to pay legal costs incurred by *Le Monde*. □

'No evidence' for cable hazards

Washington. A panel of experts set up by the National Research Council has advised the US government that there is "no conclusive and consistent evidence" that exposure to electric and magnetic fields from overhead power lines causes cancer or other adverse health effects. The panel said the established correlation between the incidence of leukaemia and proximity to the lines was most likely to be due to other factors related to the vicinity of the power lines, such as poverty or high traffic density.

According to panel members, the study could help to dispel the widespread but unproven public perception that overhead power lines are a health hazard. But although some members said last week they themselves would comfortably live near the lines, others contended that until the cause of the correlation was established, research into a possible link should continue. □

First for Irish science policy

Dublin. The Irish government last week published its first white paper on science, technology and innovation. It lays down mechanisms for establishing a formal science policy, the absence of which had been blamed for the virtual disappearance of funding for basic research three years ago (see *Nature* 364, 662; 1993).

The white paper is based on a detailed report prepared by the Science, Technology and Innovation Advisory Council, made up of six academics, nine industrialists and three civil servants, which was established last year. Most of the report's 160 recommendations (see *Nature* 374, 396; 1995) have been adopted, including the idea of setting up government science planning committees. Although the white paper does not promise to raise the level of funding for research and development, some additional funds have already been injected into basic research this year. □

China aims at Moon missions

Hong Kong. China aims to send astronauts into space early next century and to devise cheap transport systems that could land people on the Moon, the National Space Administration said last week. Wang Liheng, vice-administrator of the space agency, said that China "expected to make a breakthrough" in crewed space flights in the next five years. He was speaking shortly before the opening of one of China's largest space fairs in Zhuhai.

The country is also developing light spacecraft for firing satellites into orbit and larger Long March rockets to carry payloads of up to 20 tonnes — double the current capacity — according to Li

Jianzhong, president of the China Academy of Launch Vehicle Technology. Cheng Fangyun of the Chinese Academy of Sciences said that China was close to developing a small spacecraft with low operating costs that could carry astronauts. "China has reliable technology for space tracking, telemetry and control to do this," he said. □

Neuroscientist gains top honour

Tokyo. Japan's leading neuroscientist, Masao Ito, capped a successful year last Sunday when he received the Order of Culture, Japan's highest award from the Emperor Akihito, given to recognize contributions to culture and learning. Ito, who is chairman of the Science Council of Japan, succeeded earlier this year in persuading the government to spend billions of extra dollars on brain research over the next 20 years (see *Nature* 382, 105; 1996).

The new nationwide initiative will be centred on the Institute of Physical and Chemical Research in the north-west suburbs of Tokyo where Ito heads the Frontier Research Programme and its brain research project. □

Russian suicide over finances

Moscow. Vladimir Nechai, director of the All-Russia Research Institute for Technical Physics, shot himself last week in apparent despair over its financial plight. The institute, outside the city of Chelyabinsk, had had its bank accounts seized by the local tax office earlier this year because of its failure to pay its bills for electricity and other local services.

Colleagues of Nechai say that, if this had not happened, the centre would have been able to continue to support itself, despite the fact that it has not received its government grant for several months. It has recently diversified away from research on nuclear weapons to such areas as artificial hearts and contact lenses. Staff say that the final straw for Nechai — who left no public explanation for his suicide — could have been a demand from Moscow that the institute should sack half its permanent staff. □

UK nanotech funds 'too small'

London. British research into 'nanotechnology' — the study of small-scale engineering structures — risks being left behind its competitors because of a lack of government funding. This is partly because it was not identified as a priority in the recent Technology Foresight exercise, says a report published this week by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology.

The report points out that by the end of the decade the global market for nanotechnology products may be worth as much as US\$80 billion. It says that new funding has dried up from both the National Initiative on Nanotechnology and a Nanotechnology Programme backed jointly by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council and the Department of Trade and Industry. As a result, it says, "there is a danger that the momentum generated by these earlier programmes will be dissipated". The omission of nanotechnology from the Foresight exercise means that "scientists face an uphill struggle for funding". □

Japan eyes an end to tenure

Tokyo. Japan's University Council, an advisory body to the ministry of education, last week submitted a report to the ministry recommending the introduction of limited-term contracts for university faculty members. At present, all faculty members who are Japanese citizens automatically get lifetime employment.

The ministry plans to submit a bill in the next ordinary session of the Diet (Japanese parliament) in January to allow the introduction of contract employment. But it will be up to each university to decide whether to introduce the new practices. Strong resistance to the erosion of tenure among the academic community means that contracts are unlikely to be widely adopted unless financial incentives are offered to universities (see *Nature* 383, 654; 1996). □