

Vote on US breast cancer panel favours support for research

Washington. The steering committee of the US National Action Plan on Breast Cancer voted last week to return nearly all of its \$14.75 million 1997 budget to the National Cancer Institute (NCI).

The vote marks a dramatic assertion of power by those within the group who have argued that funds should be spent on advanced breast cancer research, and a defeat for those who want the action plan to play a more active role in areas such as educating physicians about breast cancer and encouraging studies of geographical clusters of its incidence. The action plan is a partnership between government agencies and breast cancer research advocates with a mandate to link activists and agencies in the fight against breast cancer. It was created in 1994, and placed in an office at the NCI, after pressure by activists led to support from President Bill Clinton.

Congress granted it \$14.75 million in 1996 and again in the 1997 fiscal year, which began on 1 October. But the steering committee voted last week by a 13:0 vote, with four abstentions, to recommend to Donna Shalala, the health secretary, that \$14 million of the 1997 allocation be returned "expeditiously" to the cancer institute, stipulating that it should be used for breast cancer research. □

Call for GMO food labelling

London. The UK government's Food Advisory Committee has reiterated its call for food manufacturers to provide information voluntarily for consumers if genetically modified organisms are used in their products. The call coincides with the end of a 24-hour protest by the environmentalist group Greenpeace against the importation of a mixed consignment of natural and genetically modified soya beans into the Belgian port of Antwerp from the United States.

Last week, more than 20 Greenpeace protesters chained themselves to the dock, preventing the gates from being opened. The protest was stopped on Friday afternoon when the US grain company Cargill, which has refused to segregate and label its shipment of genetically modified soya beans, obtained a court order that imposed a BFr1-million (US\$32,258) fine on Greenpeace for every extra hour the protest continued. □

Surveyor heads for Mars

Washington. The first of three international missions to Mars this year is under way, following the launch of the US Mars Global Surveyor (MGS) last week. The MGS will arrive in Mars orbit on 11 September next year to begin two years of systematic study of the planet's surface, atmosphere and magnetosphere.

One of the spacecraft's solar arrays did not deploy fully, but project managers expect the problem to be corrected. Russia's Mars '96 spacecraft is next up for launch on 16 November, and will arrive at Mars on 12 September next year with an orbiter, two surface landers and two penetrators. The US Mars Pathfinder will be launched on 2 December with a small lander and rover that will touch down on the martian surface on 4 July next year. □

Dog 'might have Gulf syndrome'

London. An Arizona veterinarian believes she may have come across a case of Gulf War syndrome in a dog that was in Saudi Arabia during the war. Valery Stephens of the Elmirage Animal Hospital in Surprise is treating an eight-year-old Doberman for immune-mediated thrombocytopenia, a condition in which the body destroys its own platelets, and other "bizarre neurologic signs" possibly related to the dog's travel history.

One of the dog's owners has been suffering from low platelet counts since returning from the Gulf, and is undergoing medical tests to establish whether she, too, has thrombocytopenia. Her partner, who left Saudi Arabia when he fell ill, died of cancer within

weeks of his return to the United States. Stephens says neither owners, nor the dog, have military connections. "We have no proof this is Gulf War syndrome," she emphasizes. "We're just looking for other cases, or possible answers." □

Genetical Society shuns China

London. Britain's Genetical Society has decided to suspend its affiliation to the International Genetics Federation (IGF), following controversy over the federation's decision to hold the next International Genetic Congress in Beijing, China, in 1998, despite the country's recent adoption of its 'eugenics' law. The decision by the society follows a ballot of its members, which produced a clear majority in favour of suspension (see *Nature* 383, 204; 1996). David Sherratt of the University of Oxford, the president of the society, said that despite the relatively low response to the postal ballot — only 7 per cent of the members returned ballot slips — the society's executive committee had taken the outcome as an expression of its members' wishes, and had voted virtually unanimously (with only one abstention) in favour of suspending its IGF membership. □

No-consent research rules

Washington. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved new rules that would allow investigators in some cases to include patients in research without their consent. Medical researchers said the change allows the study of desperately needed new approaches to treating patients who are gravely ill with heart attacks, strokes or head injuries.

Under the new guidelines, patients can be used in research without their consent if the conditions are as follows: the patient has a life-threatening condition, the patient is unable to say whether he or she wants to participate, no relative is available to provide consent, the community in which the research is done has been notified of the study, and the research design has been approved by the FDA. □

Martian meteorites for sale

Boston. Three martian meteorite fragments will go on sale next week at Guernsey's, a New York City auction house. The rocks, which range in size from a golf ball to a grapefruit, are said to represent the only privately-owned collection that includes all known varieties of martian meteorites: Shergottite, Nakhilite and Chassignite.

The pieces could sell for about \$2 million in total, say Guernsey's, which is donating a portion of the proceeds to the American Cancer Society. In August the world's museum curators suspended the sale of meteorites from Mars, due to skyrocketing prices following the announcement by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration of evidence of possible microbial life on martian rocks. □

Industrialist to head CSIRO

Sydney. **Charles Allen (right), the recently retired chief executive of an Australian oil production company, has been appointed the part-time chairman of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), the country's main public research agency.**



His appointment reflects the desire of the new Coalition government to appoint more industrialists to head public bodies. Allen is the second chairman in CSIRO's 70-year history not to have been a professional researcher, although he brings 14 years' experience in exploration geophysics for the Shell Oil Company, mainly in West Africa.

CSIRO scientists have been concerned that the organization might be dismantled and partially privatized, as the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, its New Zealand equivalent, has been. Allen says he hopes that CSIRO is now "secure" against being split up, and describes that part of the CSIRO's work which is for the public good as not being "directly saleable". □