

Priorities for AIDS research set out by US task force

Washington. A US interagency task force this week released a 40-page strategy to guide the AIDS policy of the Clinton administration for the coming four years. The main goals include research to develop more effective treatments, a preventive vaccine, and a cure for AIDS. Another goal is to ensure that research is translated into improved prevention and enhanced care.

The report, which has taken a year to prepare, calls for the development of microbicides, urges further work on protease inhibitors, and endorses a vaccine strategy for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). President Bill Clinton was expected to accept the report on Tuesday (17 December).

"It's the first time that the US government has developed a comprehensive strategy covering all federal agencies and providing a blueprint for the years ahead," said Richard Sorian, a spokesman for the White House Office of National AIDS Policy. The report endorses the continued oversight of all NIH AIDS research by the Office of AIDS Research. □

New hope on landmines

Boston. Possible strategies for reducing the threat to civilians posed by the estimated 120 million landmines buried in 62 countries — as well as the millions of unexploded 'bomblets' scattered throughout Laos — were published last week. They are based on a week-long 'brainstorming' workshop held at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, last August.

A panel of scientists from MIT, Harvard University, Los Alamos National Laboratory, the Naval Research Laboratory, IBM and elsewhere recommended an array of new technologies. These include a

sensor called the Meandering Winding Magnetometer and various robotic devices, and could accelerate the pace and enhance the safety of demining activities by a factor of 100 to 1,000 within five years. "We went into this workshop feeling that little could be done, but came out feeling that a great deal can be done," says Kosta Tsipis, director of MIT's Program in Science & Technology for International Security and the author of the report. □

Access to NIH clinical centres

Washington. A US National Institutes of Health (NIH) panel assessing the agency's clinical research is expected to recommend that 76 NIH-supported clinical research centres should open their doors to investigators not supported by the NIH. The recommendation is contained in a report due for release shortly by the NIH Director's Panel on Clinical Research, chaired by David Nathan, president of the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston.

Nathan says the 15-member panel is seeking "the broadest possible access of good ideas" for the centres, known as General Clinical Research Centers. "We don't want anybody excluded because they don't happen to get their grants from the NIH." The centres, which each receive an average of US\$2 million in NIH funding, support scores of NIH-backed investigators nationwide. Under the new proposal, the centres would be opened to peer-reviewed clinical investigators supported by industry and private foundations. □

Russian researchers protest

Moscow. More than a hundred nuclear researchers — previously the most favoured among Russian scientists — picketed the Council of Ministers and the finance ministry in Moscow last week to demand more funds for research. Last year, the 30 nuclear institutes that account for the core of Russia's military research received only two-thirds of their promised US\$900-million budget, and plans

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being discussed in the State Duma (the lower chamber of the Russian parliament) would reduce this to \$362 million next year. Trade union leaders who organized the protest say that employees at some institutes have not been paid for several months. □

Hobby-Eberly telescope sees light

Washington. A new 11-metre telescope at the McDonald Observatory in western Texas passed an important milestone last week by seeing its 'first light'. Following an engineering check-out period, the \$13.5 million Hobby-Eberly Telescope (HET) will begin full science operations late next year. The telescope's relatively low cost — it is only about 15 per cent of the cost of comparably-sized instruments, such as the Keck Telescope in Hawaii — is due to its being limited to spectroscopy and only viewing 70 per cent of the sky. Principal partners in the project are the University of Texas and Pennsylvania State University. □

ITER plasma model queried

Munich. Questions have been raised about the validity of a theoretical model predicting that higher-than-anticipated turbulence in the proposed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER)'s fusion plasma will effectively prevent it from reaching and maintaining a temperature high enough to ignite a fusion burn. The challenge came last week in a statement from an expert group that includes representatives from each of the four international partners participating in plans for ITER.

The model, revealed two weeks ago in the journal *Science*, has been developed by William Dorland and Michael Krotschenreuther from the University of Texas in Austin. Proponents are calling for its predictions to be taken on board by ITER's design teams. But Karl Lackner of the Institute for Plasma Physics in Garching, Germany, says that the model has already been discussed widely within the

fusion community. And the expert group has issued a statement describing the Dorland and Krotschenreuther model as having only an "average performance" in reproducing results of current experiments compared to other models that give more favourable predictions for ITER. □

Genentech co-founder quits

San Francisco. Robert Swanson, the California investment banker who helped to launch the biotechnology industry in the mid-1970s, announced last week that he is to resign as chairman of Genentech at the end of the month. Swanson co-founded the San Francisco company in 1976 with Herbert Boyer, professor of biochemistry at the University of California, San Francisco. Swanson, who is 49, says that he is leaving to concentrate on his "first love" — financing innovative young companies. □

Indian physicist awarded prize

New Delhi. **The Third World Academy of Sciences has named the Indian physicist Mambillikalathil Govind Kumar Menon (right) as the winner of the second Abdus Salam prize for science and technology, the academy's highest award. The first award was made to Federico Mayor, the director-general of Unesco.**



Menon has held several leading positions in the Indian government in policy-making and administration, and was at one time minister for science. The academy, based in Trieste, Italy, says that the award is being made for his "distinguished contributions to cosmic ray and high-energy particle physics and to the development of science in the Third World". □

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