

Debate deferred on proposed database protection treaty

London. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) in Geneva has postponed until later in the year discussion of a controversial proposed treaty on the intellectual property rights involved in the use of databases.

The treaty was to be discussed at WIPO's conference on Certain Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Questions last month (see *Nature* 383, 653; 1996). But at the end of the meeting delegates merely agreed to recognize the need to "strike a balance" between protecting the interests of both producers and users of databases.

Database compilers want to see agreement on a treaty that will outlaw unfair copying. But users — including many scientists — are concerned that tough regulations may restrict their access to important information. The issue will now be discussed at an extraordinary session of WIPO governing bodies during the next three months. □

EMBL escapes funds squeeze

Munich. Molecular biology has survived the Europe-wide squeeze on funding of international laboratories. At the end of December the council of the Heidelberg-based European Molecular Biology Laboratory unanimously confirmed its commitment to an increase in funding of 3 per cent in real terms next year. It had been feared that Germany or France might try to force a cut to the agreed long-term financial plan. The council also extended the term of office of Fotis Kafatos, the laboratory's director-general, by six years, to his retirement in 2005.

The European Molecular Biology Organization, which operates a programme of research fellowships and conferences, was awarded a 2.6 per cent increase in real terms for next year by its member states. This will allow the organization to increase the number of long-term fellowships it offers by more than 10 per cent. □

New head for DoE research

Washington. The US Department of Energy has appointed Peter Rosen, formerly dean of science at the University of Texas at Arlington, associate director for high energy and nuclear physics. Rosen is a British-born, Oxford-trained particle physicist, who took US citizenship in 1972. He replaces John O'Fallon, who had been in the post on an acting basis. High-energy and nuclear physics are the largest civilian science programmes in the energy department, with a joint annual budget of US\$1 billion. □

Radiation threatens Mars delay

Washington. A manned mission to Mars is likely to have to wait for another quarter century as researchers answer questions on the radiation hazards to humans travelling to the red planet, according to a report from the National Research Council. An earlier launch would require radiation shielding to protect against the highest estimated risk. That could cost NASA US\$10 billion to \$30 billion.

The alternative, says the report, is for the agency to "fund additional research into the biological effects of radiation in deep space". It adds that extended exposure to high energy galactic cosmic rays is likely to result in increased cancer risks, and damage to the brain. "It will take probably more than a decade to answer questions about health risks and the needed protective shielding." □

Novartis heads research table

Basel. Swiss pharmaceuticals giants Ciba Geigy and Sandoz finally merged late last month to become the world's largest life-science company, with an annual research and development budget of SFr2.3 billion (US\$1.72 billion). The merger was announced last March, but had to await the approval of the US

Federal Trade Commission, which wanted to ensure that it would not slow research and development or raise the prices of gene therapy products.

As part of the agreement, the commission demanded that Novartis license its patent rights on specific gene therapy technology to Rhône-Poulenc Rorer. The commission had expressed concern that the merger might threaten competition in the US gene therapy market as a whole, and in particular for several specific Novartis gene therapy products: herpes simplex virus thymidine kinase for the treatment of cancer and graft-versus-host disease after bone marrow transplants; factor VIII gene therapy products for the treatment of haemophilia; and interleukins 2, 3 and 6 for cancer chemotherapy. □

New Zealand reshuffles

Sydney. Maurice Williamson has become Minister for Research, Science and Technology as well as for Communications and Information Technology in the new coalition government in New Zealand, the first such government to be elected under the mixed member proportional voting system.

Williamson succeeds Simon Upton who has moved to the environment ministry but retains oversight of the commercially-driven Crown Research Institutes, established as businesses under him when the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research was abolished. Wyatt Creech remains responsible for universities as Minister for Education. He was not tested in the few months he spent in the post before the 12 October election. Two of the nine Crown Research Institutes — Geological and Nuclear Sciences, and Industrial Research — have announced that 60 staff are to be made redundant because of poor profits. □

Herb petrol dismissed as 'fraud'

New Delhi. Ramar Pillai, who found fame with his claims of having produced petrol by mixing water with a secret herb (see *Nature* 383, 112; 1996), has been declared a fraud by India's parliamentary committee on science and technology.

Pillai's dream of an inexpensive solution to the energy crisis was shattered by the report the committee wrote after watching his third experiment at the Indian Institute of Petroleum in Dehra Dun. The report, tabled in parliament, said the experiment was "nothing other" than dissolving camphor in kerosene and passing off the combustible solution as herbal petrol. The herb played no role in producing the end product. Scientists at the institute produced an identical product by repeating the experiment without the herb. □

Time honours AIDS pioneer

Washington. David Ho, the virologist and director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in New York, has been named

1996 Man of the Year by *Time* magazine for his contributions to AIDS research (right). The magazine said that Ho's work on therapies that combine several drugs had "raised hope that the virus might some day be eliminated".

Ho established that the AIDS virus, far from lying dormant, reproduces itself in vast numbers during the early stages of infection (see *Nature* 373, 123; 1995), and he pioneered the aggressive use of combination therapies to fight the virus at that stage. Ho, 44, was born in Taiwan and studied physics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and California Institute of Technology before entering Harvard Medical School. □

