

Tobacco industry faces fresh trials as product liability case begins

[WASHINGTON] A seminal trial in the saga of the buffeted US tobacco industry opened in Florida on Monday (7 April), when the family of a woman who died at 49 of lung cancer brought a product liability suit against R. J. Reynolds Tobacco (RJR).

The plaintiff's case relies heavily on internal industry documents which allegedly appear to show that cigarette manufacturers purposely concealed knowledge of tobacco's dangers from the public. RJR has countered that the woman, Jean Connor, had ample warning of tobacco's dangers from numerous sources.

The plaintiff's lawyer has said he will use damaging, newly revealed RJR documents in which a company researcher wrote in 1962 that "obviously" the evidence that cigarettes are damaging to health was "overwhelming". In a 1972 document, another RJR official allegedly wrote that "happily" for the industry, nicotine is "habituating".

Japanese physics centre heads for Brookhaven

[WASHINGTON] The Japanese Institute of Physical and Chemical Research is to establish a new physics centre at Brookhaven National Laboratory on Long Island, New York, under the directorship of T. D. Lee, a professor at Columbia University and a Nobel laureate.

The centre, which will receive \$2 million in Japanese funding in its first year, will concentrate on supporting young physics postdoctoral students and fellows and on exploiting the \$500-million Relativistic Heavy Ion Collider, which comes on stream at Brookhaven in 1999. Japan has provided \$20-million worth of hardware to support the construction of the collider.

Research at the centre will focus on theoretical physics initially, but will move on to experimental work in future years, when funding is expected to increase substantially.

Scandinavia plans park for medical technology

[LONDON] Universities, business and the health sector in Sweden and Denmark are preparing to designate regions either side of the Baltic Sea as a 'medical technology park', designed to promote industries related to biotechnology and medicine.

The 'Medicon Valley' will be linked by a 16-kilometre road and railway bridge joining Copenhagen with Malmo in Sweden, and scheduled to open in 2000. Last week, the backers of the enterprise set up the Medicon Valley Academy with an initial budget of

DKr20 million (US\$2.9 million).

The academy's founders say they hope that the bridge will stimulate cross-border contacts between industry and universities. The proposed area includes two universities — Copenhagen and Lund — three teaching hospitals, and many prominent medical and biotechnology companies, including Astra and Novo Nordisk.

NASA severs links with space probe Pioneer

[LONDON] NASA, the US space agency, has severed links with its spacecraft Pioneer 10, which was launched a quarter of a century ago and placed in a trajectory to escape the Solar System.

At 6.22 billion miles from Earth, Pioneer 10 is the furthest manmade object in space. But it had only one experiment still working, and a weak signal that took the best part of a day to reach Earth.

Since its launch in March 1972, Pioneer 10 took the first close-up photographs of Jupiter and its moons, successfully navigated the asteroid belt and used a planet's gravity to change its course. The spacecraft carries a plaque designed by the late Carl Sagan, which depicts a man, a woman, and a map of the Solar System, designed to show aliens where the spacecraft originated should it fall into the hands of another civilization.

Construction delayed at ignition facility

[WASHINGTON] Construction of the National Ignition Facility at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California, which was due to begin last week, has been postponed until May. A spokesman for the laboratory said that the delay arose to accommodate guests who want to attend the ground-breaking ceremony and would not affect the construction schedule. A group of environmentalists who plan to challenge the construction of the facility in court (see *Nature* 386, 427; 1997) said that they would also delay their planned court action.

Brain science conference comes to White House

[TOKYO] The United States has agreed to host an intergovernmental conference to discuss the future of the Human Frontier Science Program, the international research programme in molecular biology and brain science that was launched in 1987, on a Japanese initiative.

A key item on the agenda at the meeting will be future funding of the program. Japan, which currently contributes 80 per cent of the annual budget, hopes to address this funding inequality at the meeting.

The meeting, which will take place at the

White House on 20 May, will be attended by representatives from the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Japan and the European Commission.

Tuberculosis advance halted, claims WHO

[LONDON] The World Health Organization claims to have halted the upward surge in the global incidence of tuberculosis, for the first time in decades.

The agency says cases of TB have been cut from 6.5 million annually in 1990 to just over 6 million in 1996. The reduction is attributed to the success of a TB-controlling strategy combining multi-drug therapy with a new health management system.

The strategy, DOTS — Directly Observed Treatment Short-course — has been described as "the biggest health breakthrough of the decade" by Hiroshi Nakajima, WHO's director-general. Nakajima predicts that 10 million TB deaths will be prevented over the next decade as DOTS is introduced in more countries.

Cryptography guidelines adopted by OECD

[LONDON] The 29-member Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has adopted a set of guidelines on cryptography policy. Many countries are beginning to formulate policies for data security. But the OECD document, which was published at the end of last month, notes that failure to coordinate these policies will lead to obstacles in the flow of electronic information, and could impede international trade. The guidelines, somewhat controversially, recommend that third parties should be allowed legal access to decryption keys.

Senate urged to ratify chemical weapons pact

[LONDON] US president Bill Clinton has urged the Senate to ratify the United Nations Chemical Weapons Convention, warning that the United States could face diplomatic isolation and trade losses if it fails to do so.

The treaty is set to enter into force on 29 April, as it has been ratified by more than 65 countries. But it faces stiff opposition from conservative Republicans who claim the treaty will be difficult to verify and opens up the United States to intrusive inspections.

If it does not ratify the convention, the United States faces bans on trading in many chemicals and pesticides. In an attempt to address Republican concerns, the Clinton administration has suggested formalizing a policy of retaliating against any chemical warfare attack against the United States.