

Last smallpox stocks granted stay of execution

Washington The planned destruction of the last official stocks of smallpox virus was postponed indefinitely when the executive board of the World Health Organization (WHO) met in Geneva on 17 January. The stocks, held at research institutes in the United States and Russia, had been scheduled for destruction at the end of this year. But the WHO smallpox advisory committee said last October that more time was needed to study vaccines and develop treatment programmes.

Several nations that had previously advocated the destruction of the virus, including Brazil, India and Japan, supported the call for further research. The board's decision is expected to be endorsed in May by the WHO's governing body, the World Health Assembly.

Unknown quantities take science helm in Canada

Montreal Canada's science policy is effectively on hold after a cabinet reshuffle left two key positions in the hands of politicians whose views on science are not known.

Industry minister Brian Tobin, who had been regarded as a future prime minister, unexpectedly resigned from politics on 14 January, saying he wanted to spend more time with his family. Allan Rock, previously the health minister, will now take the industry portfolio, which includes responsibility for most science-related issues. Maurizio Bevilacqua replaces Gilbert Normand in the junior post of secretary of state for science, research and development.

Both Rock and Bevilacqua are yet to make clear their positions on key science issues such as public Internet access and the long-awaited policy document on innovation.



New Canadian industry minister Allan Rock has so far given scant indication of his policy plans.

JACQUES BOISSINOT/AP

French to use spare embryos for study...

Paris The French parliament is set to allow research on stem cells from embryos left over after *in vitro* fertilization treatment.

France's 1994 bioethics law prohibits research on embryonic tissue, but states that this legislation should be reviewed within five years. The bill to revise the law allows research on stem cells from surplus embryos, but not the cloning of embryos for therapeutic or reproductive purposes. It also creates a new agency to authorize human-embryo research. The lower parliament was due to vote on the bill as *Nature* went to press, and was expected to pass it.

The law is unlikely to come into force until at least 2003. In the meantime, research minister Roger-Gérard Schwartzberg wants researchers to be allowed to import tissue from surplus embryos.

...as British law stretches to make human cloning illegal

London The British government has won its appeal against a court ruling that threatened to foil its attempts to regulate human cloning.

The ProLife Alliance, a group opposed to human-cloning research, challenged British legislation in the High Court last November, arguing that existing laws did not cover embryos created by nuclear transfer (see *Nature* 414, 381; 2001). The court agreed, effectively making it legal to create a cloned human baby. The Court of Appeal has now overturned this verdict, ruling on 18 January that nuclear-transfer embryos are covered.

The new judgement is "admirably sensible", says Robert May, president of the Royal Society, adding that the legislation permits legitimate uses of cloning technology but outlaws reproductive cloning. Those hoping to use the technology to investigate the therapeutic potential of embryonic stem cells must apply for a licence from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority.

Japan's ocean-drilling boat tests the water

Tokyo The Japanese ocean-drilling ship *Chikyu* — meaning 'Earth' — made its maiden voyage last Friday.

The vessel is a key component of the Integrated Ocean Drilling Program, a US-Japanese collaboration that is due to start in October 2003. It will focus on seismology and the search for bacteria beneath the Earth's surface.

Chikyu, which can sleep 150 researchers and crew, will drill to 7 kilometres below the sea floor, three times the current record. The ship will spend a year in dock for more construction before being equipped with its drilling and research apparatus. Its



Deep digger: *Chikyu* should smash the ocean drilling record when it enters service in 2006.

contribution to the drilling project should begin in 2006.

♦ www.iodp.org

Study of cancer sufferers will evaluate cannabis pain relief

London British research into the clinical use of cannabis is to be extended to include studies of pain relief in cancer sufferers. More than 100 people with terminal cancer will take part in the trials, in which whole-plant extracts of cannabis will be given as a spray under the tongue. The company behind the study, Salisbury-based GW Pharmaceuticals, is already testing cannabis on patients with multiple sclerosis and spinal-cord injuries.

The attitude of British officials towards medical cannabis use has softened in recent months. Home Secretary David Blunkett said in October that the law could be changed to allow clinical use if trials were successful.

♦ www.gwpharm.com

Britain says goodbye to foot-and-mouth

London Britain has finally been declared free of foot-and-mouth disease, 11 months after the first outbreaks of the cattle ailment.

Four million animals have been culled to contain the disease, which is estimated to have cost the farming and tourism industries around £5 billion (US\$7.2 billion). The outbreak also forced Prime Minister Tony Blair to postpone last spring's general election for a few weeks, and brought about the demise of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (see *Nature* 414, 839; 2001).

The announcement comes after three months in which no new cases were recorded in Northumbria, the last British county to be declared free of the disease. It will be several weeks before the remaining restrictions on animal movements are lifted.

The political and scientific fallout from the epidemic is far from over. Several reports, including one published this week by the National Farmers Union, criticize the government's handling of the outbreak. A Royal Society study of infectious livestock disease will report its findings in the summer.

♦ www.nfu.co.uk

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