

Deer meat suspected of causing hunters' brain-disease deaths

Atlanta Epidemiologists are investigating whether the deaths of three hunters from brain diseases are linked to their possible consumption of meat infected with chronic wasting disease (CWD).

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, last week sent a team of researchers to Wisconsin to help officials study the deaths. The hunters often participated in wild-game feasts at a Wisconsin lodge during the early 1980s, and may have consumed elk meat from Colorado, Wisconsin state epidemiologist Jeff Davis told *Nature*. CWD, a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy similar to mad-cow disease and its human form, Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD), has been endemic in Colorado since the 1960s.

Two of the hunters died in 1993, one from CJD and the other from a more common neurological ailment, Pick's disease. The third died from CJD in 1999. There is no confirmed link between CJD and the consumption of deer or elk infected with CWD. But beef from animals with mad-cow disease is suspected of causing variant CJD, a form of CJD that has afflicted dozens of people in Britain.



Colorado elk populations are infected with chronic wasting disease, which is similar to CJD.

UCL's provost resigns as financial crisis looms

London Chris Llewellyn Smith has resigned as provost of University College London (UCL), amid reports that senior academics have expressed concern about his leadership abilities.

A physicist and former head of CERN, the European particle-physics laboratory near Geneva, Llewellyn Smith is believed to have offered to resign after the university's ruling council received a letter from dozens of senior staff expressing no confidence in him. The university announced his resignation "with regret" on 25 July, and said that the college's former provost Derek Roberts will take over for a year.

The departure is being blamed on staff anger at the college's financial problems — it is forecast to lose some £8 million (US\$12.5

million) this year — and controversial restructuring plans, including plans to merge some departments. Llewellyn Smith's position was further weakened when the college failed to perform as well as hoped in the recent research assessment exercise.

A UCL spokesperson said that Llewellyn Smith is leaving to pursue other interests, initially in the physics department at the University of Oxford.

Cell restrictions stem Framework dispute

Munich A proposal from Denmark to restrict European Union (EU) funding of stem-cell research is set to resolve the disputes that have dogged the European Commission's sixth Framework programme.

Up to 3% of the 17.5-billion-euro (US\$17.2-billion) Framework programme, which will begin in November, could originally have been spent on projects involving human embryonic stem cells. But Germany, Austria and Italy objected to such research on ethical grounds, and at one point the dispute threatened to derail the entire programme (see *Nature* 417, 680; 2002).

Denmark, which currently holds the EU presidency, proposed last week that funding for research on human embryonic stem cells should be restricted to cell lines that already exist in cell banks or in culture. The suggestion has been met with informal agreement from all the EU's member states.

The restriction will be in place until at least the end of 2003, during which time the European Commission will compile a report on the legal and scientific developments in the field. Member states will then try again to find a common position.

Dinosaur theft proves costly for palaeo-plunderer

San Diego US federal authorities have won a conviction for the theft of an *Allosaurus* skeleton from government land in Utah — but have not yet recovered the dinosaur, which was sold to a Japanese company.

Barry James — a fossil dealer in Sunbury, Pennsylvania — pleaded guilty to charges of theft by receiving stolen property, on 23 July in a state court in Salt Lake City, and agreed to pay the government \$50,000 in compensation. The conviction signals the hard line being taken by US authorities to stop the theft of palaeontological specimens from public land.

James paid two men to dig up the skeleton from federal land in Utah more than a decade ago. He sold it in 1992 to Hayashibara of Okayama, which carries out research on pharmaceuticals and food products.

Hayashibara officials were unaware that the fossil was stolen and had hoped to exhibit it. The company is now considering returning the fossil to the United States.



Research suggests there is "an appreciable risk" that vCJD can be spread in blood transfusions.

Sheep study highlights CJD risk from blood

London Researchers have produced the strongest evidence so far that prion diseases, including variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (vCJD), can be transmitted through blood.

Tests at the Institute of Animal Health's neuropathogenesis unit in Edinburch found that, of 24 sheep given blood from sheep infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), two developed the disease themselves (*Journal of General Virology*; doi: 10.1099/vir.0.18580-0). The same group showed transmission to a single animal two years ago (F. Houston, J. D. Foster, A. Chong, N. Hunter, & C. J. Bostock *Lancet* 356, 999–1000; 2000), but others questioned the result because only one animal was involved.

The new result shows there is "an appreciable risk" of humans catching vCJD from blood transfusions, the team says. The British government has responded to the study by considering new safety measures, such as excluding people who have received blood transfusions from giving blood.

Blooming algae pose health risk in the Baltic Sea

Stockholm Swedish holiday-makers flock to the islands and southern coastline of the Baltic Sea every summer. Now they may want to rethink their choice of destination, after mild weather triggered a surge in toxic algae.

Nodularia spumigena can cause liver damage and is potentially lethal to small children. Blooms of the algae are often seen in the Baltic Sea in summer, but recent high temperatures and low winds have allowed the algae to thrive, forcing the Swedish authorities to ban swimming in some areas.

The algae feed on nutrients found in sewage from Estonia and Russia. Pentti Kangas, a marine biologist at the Finnish Environment Institute in Helsinki, says that sewage from the St Petersburg region is washed untreated into the Baltic Sea.

♦ www.helcom.fi/environment/algalbloss.html