

Mosquito takes flight to spread West Nile virus to California

San Francisco Health officials in California are continuing to investigate how the West Nile virus arrived on the US west coast, after tests confirmed that a Los Angeles woman had become infected.

The case of encephalitis, from which the woman has recovered, was reported as a probable West Nile virus infection on 6 September (see *Nature* 419, 102; 2002). But health officials are puzzled as to how she became infected. No other cases have turned up west of the Rocky Mountains. Nor has close monitoring of birds and mosquitoes revealed the virus to be present in California.

Some experts believe that the woman, who lives near Los Angeles airport, may have been bitten by a mosquito that arrived on an aircraft. Mosquito-borne diseases are known to travel by plane. Six cases of malaria appeared near Brussels airport in 1995, and another four turned up around the Charles de Gaulle airport outside Paris in 1999.

NIH names heads of alcohol and mental-health institutes

Washington A leadership void at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) was partially filled last week, as NIH director Elias Zerhouni appointed new heads for two of the agency's institutes. Thomas Insel will lead the National Institute of Mental Health, and Ting-Kai Li will take charge at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. Both are due to take over in November.

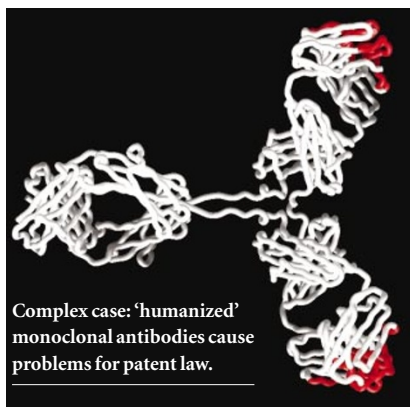
Insel is currently director of the Center for Behavioral Neuroscience at Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta, Georgia, where he studies the role of the neuropeptide oxytocin in social behaviour. Li, director of the Indiana Alcohol Research Center at Indiana University School of Medicine in Indianapolis, works on alcohol metabolism and the genetics of alcoholism.

Li and Insel are the first new institute directors to be appointed by Zerhouni, who needed to find chiefs for several institutes when he arrived in May.

Genentech wins first round of patent battle

San Francisco In a case that has important implications for the burgeoning business of monoclonal-antibody pharmaceuticals, Genentech of South San Francisco has drawn first blood in a patent dispute with its rival Chiron.

Monoclonal antibodies are now emerging as highly profitable drugs (see *Nature* 417, 584–586; 2002). Genentech earned around \$350 million in 2001 from its drug Herceptin,



Complex case: 'humanized' monoclonal antibodies cause problems for patent law.

which targets a receptor on the surface of breast-cancer cells. But Chiron, based in Emeryville, California, claimed that a patent issued in April 2000 gave it rights to all monoclonal antibodies against the receptor.

On 6 September, a jury in Sacramento accepted Genentech's argument that Chiron's patent covers only mouse monoclonal antibodies. Genentech's product is a 'humanized' monoclonal antibody, created by grafting the mouse antibody regions needed to bind to the receptor onto a human antibody.

Experts warn of further lawsuits as the patent system struggles to deal with these sophisticated drugs. "Unlike small molecules, which you can completely define, monoclonal antibodies are a more complex issue," observes immunochemist Martin Glennie of the University of Southampton, UK.

Fruitflies' eyes and shifting plates earn Balzan prizes

Milan Developmental biologist Walter Gehring and geologist Xavier Le Pichon are among this year's winners of the prestigious Balzan prizes for science and culture.

Gehring, who works at the University of Basel in Switzerland, was recognized in particular for his identification in the fruitfly *Drosophila* of *Pax6*, a gene that controls eye development in both invertebrates and vertebrates. Le Pichon, from the Collège de France in Paris, was honoured for his work on plate tectonics. Each scientist wins SFr 1 million (US\$660,000), half of which must be used to support young researchers' projects.

The Milan-based International Balzan Foundation awarded the other two prizes to Anthony Grafton, a historian of social science at Princeton University in New Jersey, and Dominique Schnapper, a sociologist at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, the first woman to be given the award.

The academic areas in which the Balzan prizes are awarded change each year. Next year's fields are genetics and evolution, infrared astronomy, social psychology and European history since 1900.

Italians rally to stop political appointments

Rome Some 600 researchers gathered in the Italian capital last week to protest against rumoured reforms which they claim would politicize Italy's science base. The reforms would split the main basic research organization, the CNR, by discipline into 15 departments; the head of each department would be appointed by the research ministry.

According to a draft document leaked from the research ministry at the beginning of August, each department head would be able to name the directors of institutes within the department. Alarmed at the prospect of political appointees being given such power, 2,500 researchers signed a protest petition. However, the deputy minister for research, Guido Possa, says that the leaked document is no more than a starting point for internal discussions about changes to the research landscape.

The CNR has only just completed a reform ordered by the previous government, which concentrated resources by reducing the number of institutes from 330 to 100 (see *Nature* 412, 264–265; 2001). Under this plan, the heads of institutes are appointed by expert committees.

'New moon' identified as long-lost spacecraft

Washington Call it an unusual case of extraterrestrial lost and found. A chunk of debris from an Apollo lunar mission may have returned to Earth's orbit after more than three decades wandering about the Solar System.

The object was discovered on 3 September by Bill Yeung, an amateur astronomer in Arizona. It was initially thought to be a third natural satellite of Earth, along with the Moon and an asteroid called Cruithne, which is some 5 kilometres across and was discovered in 1986. Cruithne moves in a complex orbit, buffeted by the Earth's and the Moon's gravity. But analysis of the new object's speed and trajectory revealed that it is more likely to be a piece of space junk.

Calculations by researchers at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena,

California, show that the object could be the third stage of the Apollo 12 mission's Saturn V rocket, which left Earth in 1969. If this is correct, the object would have travelled around the Sun until Earth's gravity pulled it back into orbit in April.



Return to sender: Saturn V may have come home.