Discontent grows as cancer institute remains rudderless

Munich Germany's largest biomedical research institute, the Heidelberg-based German Cancer Research Centre (DKFZ), which has nearly 2,000 employees, has suddenly found itself without a leader — and with no immediate prospect of finding one.

Virologist Bernhard Fleckenstein was presented as successor to scientific director Harald zur Hausen last month, but a few days later he ended negotiations with the German federal research ministry. The ministry apparently failed to meet his desired salary, but Fleckenstein says that there were also "irreconcilable differences" between himself and the ministry about how the DKFZ should be run.

The DKFZ is one of Germany's 16 national research centres, which have recently been reoriented towards strategic research. Fleckenstein says he is uncomfortable with the hierarchical structure of decision-making in Germany's research programme, and wanted more freedom for DKFZ scientists.

The appointment committee has resumed what could be a lengthy search. In the meantime, scientists are worried about the power vacuum, given the threat of financial cuts as the German government tries to balance its deficits, and the impending retirement within the next few years of several of the institute's senior scientists.

Parapsychology post set up for long-dead benefactor

Stockholm **After a 40-year wait, psychologists at Lund University in Sweden are about to establish a chair endowed by a legacy from Danish businessman Paul Thorsen. But the move raises even more eyebrows now than it would have done in 1962, as Thorsen stated that the new position should be in the areas of his own amateur interests: parapsychology and hypnology.**

Thorsen, a margarine magnate, had no family but wanted to ensure a pension for his two servants before allowing his legacy to be released to the university. Now that both have died, the university is advertising the position.

"We've got accustomed to the idea by now," says Jitka Linden, head of the university's psychology department, "but we are aware that it might be controversial." But she adds that "there are already several chairs in parapsychology around the world, and our selection will be as rigorous as for any other professorship". If no suitable candidate can be found, she says, the chair will not be filled.

US acts to keep SARS sequence public

San Francisco The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia, has applied for a US patent on the coronavirus thought to cause severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The move is an attempt to head off companies that might monopolize future diagnostics and treatments for SARS, says CDC director Julie Gerberding. But the situation may develop into a full-scale intellectual-property battle.

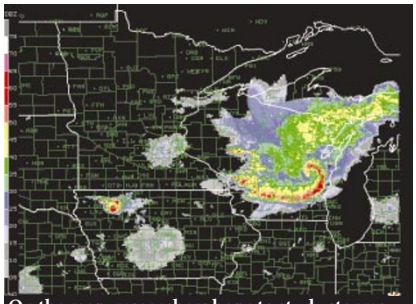
Among the CDC's competitors for patent rights are the University of Hong Kong, where the coronavirus was first observed, and the British Columbia Cancer Agency, the private research foundation that first sequenced the virus's genome. The cancer agency says that it would plough any royalties back into research.

In joining the patent fray, the CDC, which seldom files such applications, is recognizing that patents on early-stage research can hinder further development, depending on how the holder behaves, says Robert Cook-Deegan, director of the Center for Genome Ethics, Law and Policy at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. "They are smart to do it," he says.

Giant jellyfish leaves researchers red-faced

San Francisco How it managed to escape notice for so long is unclear, but a new giant species of jellyfish, measuring a metre across, has only now been described by a team of marine biologists in California. The monster jellyfish, known as 'big red', was first spotted in the inky waters at depths of more than 600 metres in 1993. But it was not until 1998 that George Matsumoto and his team at the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute in Moss Landing first got close enough to realize that it could be new to science. Rather than having slender tentacles, big red (*Tiburonia granrojo*) has between three and seven chubby arms that it uses to grapple with prey, and has been assigned to an entirely new subfamily — the Tiburoniinae.

NOAA/MBARI



WSI/UCAR

On the map: researchers hope to study storms such as these 'bow echoes' at close quarters.

Airborne lab crews hope study will go down a storm

Washington **When this summer's thunderstorms begin barrelling across the US Midwest, researchers will be tagging along in the largest storm study since the 1970s.**

Funded by the National Science Foundation, the $4-million study will launch three aircraft, loaded with atmospheric scientists and mobile weather labs, from St Louis, Missouri, directly into a type of storm cluster called a mesoscale convective system.

Unlike thunderstorms, which can wax and wane within hours, these systems unfold in the evening and can devastate communities with tornado-like winds and rainfall for a full 24 hours. As they decay, they can trigger new storms called bow echoes that roll off the main storm, forming an 'arc of torment'.

The flight data will help forecasters to understand what triggers these storms, and to predict where and when they will arise.

Ousted university vet sues over dismissal

San Diego A Chinese researcher who was acquitted last year of trying to steal a tissue-growing technology from the University of California, Davis, is suing the university.

Bin Han, a veterinarian who worked in an ophthalmology lab at the university, claims in a state lawsuit filed on 5 May that allegations — which led to criminal charges — were made against him in retaliation for disclosing operational problems.

University officials deny this, arguing that Han's annual contract was simply not renewed last spring. Last May, police at the university seized research materials for corneal repair at Han's home, and found an air ticket to China, where he was collaborating in research.

Han alleges in the Sacramento Superior Court lawsuit that he was wrongfully dismissed, retaliated against as a whistle-blower, and had his civil rights violated. He now wants a new job at the university. The lawsuit is expected to be closely watched by other US universities, given the sensitivity of investigations into foreign researchers.