

Researcher faces life in prison for revenge radiation poisoning

Beijing A Chinese medical researcher has received a suspended death sentence for attempting to poison a business rival with radioactive material. Such sentences usually result in life imprisonment.

Gu Tianming and the victim, identified in government news accounts only by his surname, Liu, had run a laser-treatment centre together but had apparently fallen out over business dealings. In an act of spite, Gu forged documents to buy an industrial machine that uses iridium-192 — a radioactive element that anti-terrorism experts fear could be used in a ‘dirty bomb’ to attack populated areas. He then secreted pellets of the element in the ceiling tiles of his colleague’s office in a hospital in Guangzhou. Liu suffered fatigue, headaches and vomiting; a further 74 people in the hospital, including a pregnant woman, also reported symptoms.

Gu’s assistant, Fang Zhenhua, was sentenced to 15 years in jail for helping Gu with the plan.

Top lab contracts awarded as US battles deadly bugs

San Diego Massachusetts and Texas have won the top prizes in the US National Institutes of Health’s competition for contracts to build high-security biodefence research labs (see *Nature* 425, 110; 2003).

Boston University Medical Center and the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston will each be given \$120 million to build the National Biocontainment Laboratories. The facilities will house labs rated as biosafety level 4, and so will be able to handle exotic agents that pose a high risk of life-threatening diseases, for which there is often no vaccine or therapy — such as Ebola, hantavirus infections and Rift Valley fever.

Nine other universities will receive between \$7 million and \$21 million to establish Regional Biocontainment Laboratories, which will examine less dangerous agents.



Handle with care: the United States is to build labs to house the world’s deadliest pathogens.

Climate model gets whirlwind treatment

London A state-of-the-art climate model is now running on one of the world’s fastest computers.

The Earth Simulator supercomputer (see *Nature* 416, 579–580; 2002) in Yokohama, Japan, can perform more than 30 trillion operations per second, and will be used to run programs investigating everything from geosciences to weather forecasting. The computer’s current task is to run one of the world’s most advanced climate models, developed by the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research in Bracknell, near London. The model can be run at a much higher resolution on the supercomputer: the atmosphere is divided into 100-kilometre squares, rather than the 300-km squares typically used by the Hadley Centre’s own computer. This will allow researchers to capture small-scale weather features, such as hurricanes (pictured), that other models might miss.



“This makes a huge difference to what we can do,” says Julia Slingo, a climate modeller at the University of Reading, UK. Results from the Earth Simulator, which went online in March 2002, were presented at a workshop on Earth-system modelling in Cambridge, UK, last week.

Ecstasy proposed as help for stress victims

Washington The ‘clubbers’ drug’ ecstasy may be put to a clinical use, now that claims of deadly side-effects have been retracted. Experts at the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies in Sarasota, Florida, think that the drug could be used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

The study was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration in November 2001, but the team has struggled to find an independent review board that is prepared to monitor the study. The project received a near-fatal blow last year when another group claimed that low doses of the drug killed several laboratory monkeys. But their findings were retracted last month after the researchers realized that they had dosed the monkeys with methamphetamine — also known as ‘speed’ — instead of ecstasy.

In the wake of the retraction, an undisclosed board agreed on 23 September to monitor the stress study. The researchers now have one more hurdle to clear: they need a permit from the US Drug Enforcement Agency to dispense the pills.

Search comes to an end as Cell fills editor’s chair

Washington A new editor takes the helm of the prestigious molecular biology journal *Cell* this week. After a prolonged search, Cell Press has appointed Emilie Marcus, previously editor of *Neuron*, another of the publisher’s titles.

Cell’s previous editor, Vivian Siegel, left in January to head the Public Library of Science, an open-access publishing venture based in San Francisco (see page 554).

Cell was founded by Benjamin Lewin in

1974. He propelled it to international renown and remained as editor until 1999.

Marcus has pledged to maintain close contact with researchers, and always be available to discuss manuscripts with authors, as Lewin was. “We will have a very accessible, open office,” she says.

Help basic science, cry European Nobellists

Brussels As the Nobel Prizes were being announced in Stockholm this week, a group of 45 European Nobel laureates was busy lobbying in Brussels. They handed the European research commissioner, Philippe Busquin, a letter urging him to assign highest priority to establishing a European Research Council, a proposed agency for funding curiosity-driven research across all disciplines (see *Nature* 419, 108–109; 2002).

The letter’s signatories argue that current European research programmes are not suited to basic science. A flexible, ‘bottom-up’ agency, driven by researchers rather than administrators, is an essential component that is missing from Busquin’s vision of pan-European research, they say.

“There is an overwhelming level of support for the European Research Council among Europe’s Nobel community,” says Erwin Neher, a neuroscientist at the Max Planck Institute of Biophysical Chemistry in Göttingen, Germany, and joint winner of the 1991 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine, who initiated the letter.

Correction

The News Feature “Spare me the lecture” (K. Powell *Nature* 425, 234–236; 2003) should have credited a team led by Daiji Sawada and Michael Piburn of Arizona State University with developing the Reformed Teaching Observation Protocol.