

Swedish biobank data used to identify tsunami victims

Stockholm Swedish authorities have opened up a national biobank of blood samples in order to identify victims of the Asian tsunami.

The biobank, based at the Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm, contains blood samples from babies born since 1974, and is used for medical research. But politicians approved a time-restricted law last month to allow police limited access to the biobank to match DNA samples with those from unidentified tsunami victims.

Concerns about the privacy of the biobank were raised in 2003, when it was opened to obtain a blood sample for a suspect in the murder of foreign minister Anna Lindh. This prompted some Swedes to demand that their samples in the registry be destroyed.

But in the tsunami identification case there have been no complaints, says Claes Guthenberg, head of the biobank laboratory: "We are seen as helping others in a disaster situation."

Sri Lanka turns to DNA test to pinpoint baby's parents

Tokyo Sri Lankan authorities are using DNA tests to establish the true parents of a baby washed up alive on a beach after the Asian tsunami in December. So far nine women have laid claim to Baby 81, who was the 81st admission to the hospital on 26 December. The results of the test are expected this week.

DNA tests are also being marshalled at public research institutes around the world for the more gruesome task of identifying victims of the tsunami. The Beijing Genomics Institute in China, for example, has already screened 100 samples from corpses from Thailand, and anticipates testing up to 4,000. Data on standard DNA markers that can be used to identify bodies and family relations will be deposited in a Thai data bank.

Medical agency blamed for upset over lab move

London UK politicians have criticized the Medical Research Council (MRC) for its handling of proposals to relocate one of the country's largest research institutes.

A report from a House of Commons select committee, due to be released this week, catalogues a deterioration in relations between the MRC and staff at the National Institute for Medical Research over the past two years. The MRC "signally failed to carry its troops with it" when discussing

China's hunt for climate clues reaches a peak

London One of the last unconquered corners of the world was reached last month by a team of a dozen Chinese scientists and explorers (see right).

The group travelled by tractor from the Chinese Antarctic base to the peak on the ice cap known as Dome A. At more than 4,000 metres above sea level, Dome A is the highest point on the continent's ice sheet. One of the team had to be helicoptered out when he developed suspected altitude sickness.

The scientists established a temporary station to extract ice-core samples, which provide a record of Antarctic climate. Dome A is important because it may yield cores older than the 900,000-year-old cores obtained by the European EPICA consortium. The EPICA core was recently extracted from a slightly less inhospitable site on the plateau called Dome C.

Astronomers also believe that Dome A has huge potential as a site for submillimetre, millimetre and infrared astronomy because of its dry conditions and clear skies. Plans to install a station at the site are under consideration in Australia and other countries.



YANG LEI/PHOTOCOME

proposals to move the institute from its present site at Mill Hill, on the outskirts of London, to a central site close to one of the capital's universities, concludes the report.

But the committee stopped short of endorsing allegations, made by some institute staff, that MRC chief executive Colin Blakemore had attempted to coerce



Colin Blakemore: wants to move Mill Hill lab.

members of a task force established to consider the proposed move (see *Nature* 432, 662; 2004). The council is due to make a decision on the proposals at a meeting scheduled for this week.

Washington state draws on tobacco cash for research

San Diego The newly elected governor of Washington state has proposed a \$350-million Life Sciences Discovery Fund to boost biomedical research. The move follows a trend of several US states hoping to ride the biotech wave.

Washington governor Christine Gregoire last week introduced measures in the state legislature to fund research to the tune of \$35 million per year for a decade, beginning

in 2008. The money is being made available from Washington's allotment of a national tobacco lawsuit settlement. Gregoire hopes that federal and private grants will take the total funding to more than \$1 billion.

Europe finds Viagra patent hard to swallow

Munich The drug company Pfizer has lost a seven-year battle for its 1998 European patent on the use of Viagra and related compounds in erectile dysfunction. The European Patent Office withdrew the patent on 3 February. But Pfizer's 1991 patent on the structure of Viagra's active ingredient, sildenafil citrate, is not affected by the ruling.

Sildenafil citrate belongs to a class of compound that inhibits a particular phosphodiesterase enzyme, leading to increased blood flow into the penis. Pfizer has sold more than one billion Viagra pills worldwide since it was introduced in 1998.

A consortium of competing drug companies argued that by the time Pfizer filed for the second Viagra patent in 1994, it was already widely known that such compounds improve erectile function. The patent office's decision allows competing companies to freely commercialize in Europe other drugs targeting the same enzyme. Two alternatives to Viagra — Bayer's Levitra and Eli Lilly's Cialis — have already been marketed pending the outcome of the patent battle.

Editorial note

Nature regrets that a scheduling oversight led to an inappropriate positioning of an advertisement from New England Biolabs (NEB) next to editorial coverage of the Asian tsunami, giving a misleading impression of insensitivity. Apologies to our readers and NEB.

MRC