

ON THE RECORD

“The station is like an old suitcase whose handle is missing... it's totally useless, but you just can't bear to part with it.”

A former space explorer gets sentimental about the ailing International Space Station

SCORECARD

Pine trees
Australian forestry authorities have netted around US\$1 million by auctioning off some ancient trees. Nearly 300 cuttings taken from Wollemi pines, rare fossil trees that grow in a secret grove in the mountains near Sydney, were sold by Sotheby's on 23 October.



Giant squid
Actor and wannabe rock star Kevin Bacon has penned a song to honour the giant squid, photographed last month by Japanese scientists.



Consumption
Disease experts are speculating that tuberculosis and infertility were partly to blame for the gloomy view of humanity displayed by author George Orwell in his dystopic novel 1984.

NUMBER CRUNCH**Hurricane Wilma**

On 18 October, Hurricane Wilma screamed into life, just two months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the US Gulf Coast region. By the time Wilma hit the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, on 21 October, it had set a record for the strongest hurricane ever to rise from the Atlantic Basin.

882 millibars was the record-setting low pressure reached by Wilma at its peak.

888 millibars was the previous record for Atlantic hurricane intensity, set by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988.

870 millibars was the peak intensity of 1979's Super Typhoon Tip, which holds the record for the strongest and largest cyclone.

Source: US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

P. GARDINO/COPIES

**Trial aims to measure social effects of choosing babies' sex****WASHINGTON DC**

US doctors have launched a clinical trial to assess the effects of allowing couples to select whether they will have a boy or a girl.

Doctors can use a technology called pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) to examine the sex of embryos that they create by assisted reproduction. Couples then select male or female embryos to implant in the mother's uterus, but the practice is controversial and banned in a number of countries.

Sandra Carson and two colleagues at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, started their trial last month, after nine years of consultations with their institutional review board. The doctors have a waiting list of at least 50 couples, but they will only enroll those who already have a child, and want to have a child of the opposite sex — an approach referred to as 'family balancing'.

An experimental technique called sperm

sorting is currently being tested to see whether it can reliably create embryos of a desired sex. But Carson says no one has examined what happens when couples use PGD, a more established tool, to choose an embryo's sex for non-medical reasons.

The practice, known as 'social sex selection', is thought to be common in the United States. One study found that almost 3% of PGD procedures, which are performed thousands

"We can sanction and remove members who don't obey ethics statements."

of times a year, were used to choose a child's sex (K. Sermon *et al. Hum. Reprod.* 20, 19–34; 2005). But countries such as Britain and Canada have banned the practice owing to public concerns that it could lead to discrimination against women.

"There are still a lot of questions in people's minds about whether this is something that should be pursued," says Robert Brzyski, a fertility doctor at the University of Texas Health Science Center in San Antonio. Brzyski says

IMAGE UNAVAILABLE FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS

Right to choose? Although private US clinics allow parents to decide the sex of their child, little work has been done on what this means for the family.

he does not offer social sex selection at his clinic because it contradicts the idea that a child should be unconditionally loved, regardless of its sex. "It undermines the principles of the parent-child relationship," Brzyski says.

The United States does not regulate social sex selection, but in the past few years two professional societies, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) and the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), have issued statements opposing it.

A spokesman for the ASRM, Sean Tipton, says that the society has no comment on the trial that Carson is running. However, Tipton says, "we can sanction and remove members who don't obey ethics statements."

Carson thinks her study, which will look at the health of the babies born as well as social factors in the families as the children grow up, could convince the ASRM and ACOG to revise their position.

"Their statements are based on public opinions, not outcomes," Carson said at the ASRM meeting in Montreal on 18 October. "Public opinion is important, but it shouldn't be used to ban something." ■

Erika Check

Europe revamps visa rules to attract world's best minds

The red tape hampering researchers who want to do science in the European Union (EU) has been trimmed. A directive passed this month aims to make it faster for non-EU scientists to get the visas they need.

The move is part of a drive to make the EU more competitive as a knowledge-based economy compared with fast-growing regions such as Asia. "One way to do this was to make it easy for researchers from around the world to work in the EU," says Georges Bingen at the European Commission's mobility directorate.

At the moment, scientists from non-EU countries such as India, China or Iran can struggle for months to secure a visa. The new directive fast-tracks applications from researchers wanting to work for more than three months in an EU country. These 'scientist visas' will also allow researchers working in a Schengen country — one of 15 European states that have abandoned passport control between their borders — to work in other Schengen countries during their stay.

Research organizations will be central to arranging visas by certifying the status of guest researchers in formal hosting agreements, instead of leaving scientists to fight with consulates on their own.

Some research organizations, such as Germany's Max Planck Society, already have departments that help foreign visitors with their visas. "Without help from a hosting institution, non-EU scientists can wait up to a year for a visa, and sometimes arrive with the wrong papers," says Ellena Kempe, who runs the International Office at the Max Planck Institute of Molecular Cell Biology and Genetics in Dresden. The new directive should reduce the number of problems, although it won't affect security checks on scientists from politically sensitive countries.

EU ministers have also approved a recommendation to speed up short-term visas for non-EU scientists coming to meetings. "We have heard about Chinese researchers, for example, wanting to attend a meeting in Paris and finding the visa procedures so long and time-consuming that they couldn't attend," says Bingen. ■

Alison Abbott