

NIH shells out to help postdocs find career path

Elias Zerhouni, director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), unveiled an award programme on 27 January aimed at easing the transition from postdoctoral scientist to independent researcher.

Many biomedical graduates drop out early in their careers, put off by insufficient funding and the competition for tenure-track faculty positions. Furthermore, postdocs are often not allowed to apply for independent research grants — such as the NIH's R01 award — which could help them secure a permanent job.

The NIH plans to issue between 150 and 200 of the awards — each worth up to \$1 million — starting this autumn and for the next five years. The awards will allow young investigators to complete their postdoctoral research with the first two years of funding, then move to a permanent position with the final three.

► http://grants.nih.gov/grants/new_investigators/index.htm

Dust stops comet watchers getting the hole picture

How big a hole did NASA's Deep Impact probe make when it crashed into comet Tempel 1? That is what the California-based Planetary Society asked the public to predict before the mission.

But six months after impact, astronomers can only guess that the crater is somewhere between 100 and 250 metres across. The dust simply never cleared in time for them to see.

So the society has chosen three winners at random from the 1,865 contestants whose guess was in that size range. Each will receive a plaque of the same copper used to make the impactor that hit the comet.

Moon dust escapes auctioneer's hammer

Collectors of space memorabilia may have missed out on the chance to acquire some cut-price Moon dust, after a journalist pointed out that the sample on sale was probably US government property.

Bonhams auctioneers in London were due to take bids on 24 January for a vial containing 31.2 milligrams of dust from the Moon. Lot 195, which was marked as having come from the Apollo landing of July 1969, had an estimated value of £300–400 (US\$530–700). Around 200 milligrams of lunar soil, collected by the Soviet Luna 16

Serbia airs plans for birthday honour to Tesla

Belgrade Airport will soon carry the name of inventor and scientist Nikola Tesla. Within weeks, the Republic of Serbia is expected to approve a plan to honour the 150th anniversary of Tesla's birth by renaming the country's largest airport as JP Aerodrom Beograd Nikola Tesla.

The move celebrates the country's connection with the brilliant and eccentric inventor, who was born in Croatia in 1856 to a family of Serbian origin. Tesla's initial research was conducted in Europe, but his fame stems from research he did after arriving in the United States in 1884. The industrialist George Westinghouse bought Tesla's patents for motors and dynamos that work with alternating current, and he used the devices to gain advantage over his rival Thomas Edison.

Tesla also claimed to have been contacted by



extraterrestrial life and to have invented a death ray capable of destroying 10,000 aircraft at a distance of 400 kilometres.

David Bowie is slated to play Tesla in the forthcoming movie *The Prestige*.

mission in 1970, sold for \$442,000 at auction in 1993.

But any chance of a lucky bidder securing a bargain disappeared shortly before the sale. Bonhams withdrew the item after being contacted by a reporter from *The Economist* who pointed out that most lunar samples from NASA missions are considered US government property. Bonhams says it is investigating the matter with NASA and the US government.

Switching drugs may save vultures, study suggests

Conservationists are using a discovery about a drug used on livestock to urge India's government to address the falling numbers of Asian vultures (*Gyps*) in the subcontinent.

New research (G. Swan *et al.* *PLoS Biol.* 4, e66; 2006) shows that the anti-inflammatory drug meloxicam, which has the same activity in livestock as the widely prescribed drug diclofenac, does not cause toxic side effects in vultures. The birds can suffer kidney damage and gout when they eat the carcass of an animal previously treated with diclofenac.

Since diclofenac was introduced to treat livestock in the Indian subcontinent in 1994,



The bitter bit: many Asian vultures have died after eating animals previously treated with diclofenac.

the vulture population has plummeted by 95%. The Indian government pledged last March to ban the drug by September 2005, but the country is believed to have millions of stockpiled doses.

Government officials are meeting with conservationists in Delhi this week to discuss the vultures' plight.

Voluntary scheme aims to eliminate process chemical

The US Environmental Protection Agency has launched a voluntary programme to reduce the use and emission of an industrial chemical involved in making non-stick coatings, such as Teflon, and stain-resistant materials.

The chemical in question is perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), which does not readily degrade in the environment; its health effects are still being debated. The drive aims to cut both PFOA emissions and its appearance in products to 95% of 2000 levels by 2010, and to eliminate it by 2015. Teflon manufacturer DuPont, which has its headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware, has already signed up to the scheme.

PFOA is used as a processing aid during manufacture and is not part of the products. DuPont says that it will increase existing efforts to filter wayward PFOA out of air and water leaving its facilities, and also to recycle the compound.

Correction

The News story "Panel quits in row over sonar damage" (*Nature* 439, 376–377; 2006) incorrectly described a report released in January 2006 by the US National Marine Fisheries Service on the deaths of stranded whales as "final". It should have been described as "updated".