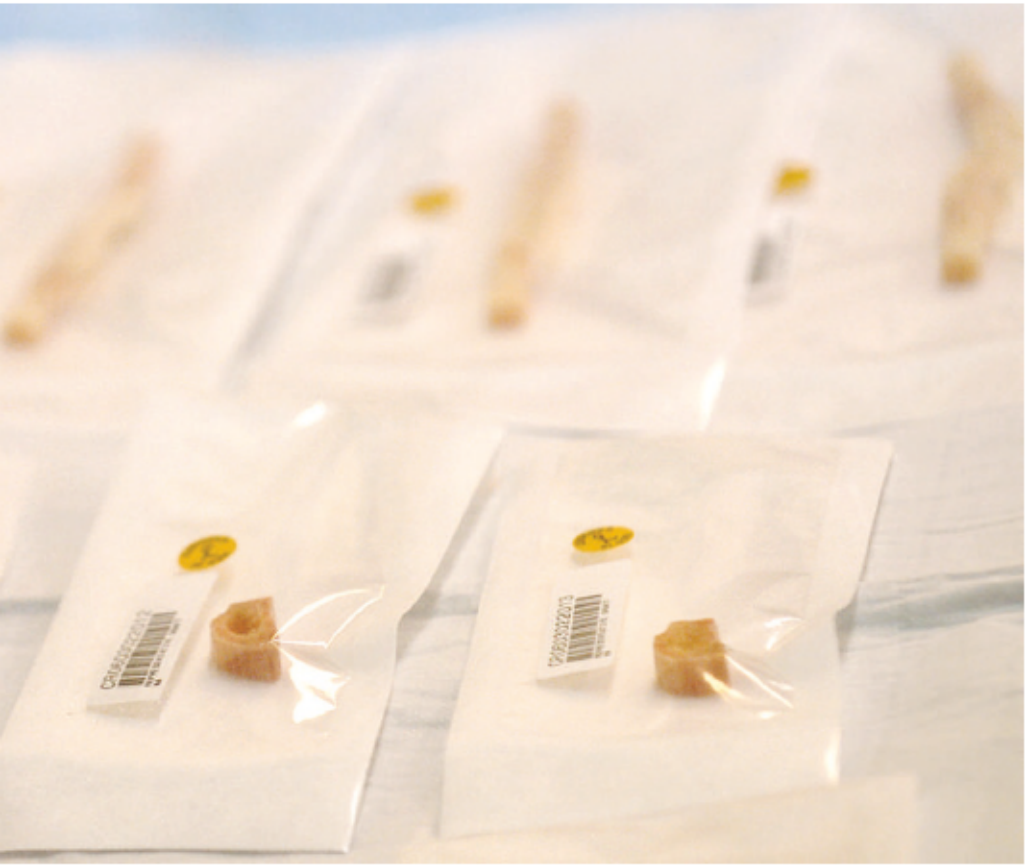

AP PHOTO/N. BERGER

patient samples in all of its 27 branches.

Such measures could help to restore confidence among potential donors. But biobank officials will have to tackle other issues if the initiatives are to succeed, such as questions about who 'owns' the information stored in tissue repositories. In April, for example, a US federal judge had to intervene in a dispute between patients, a researcher and the University of Washington in St Louis over a valuable tissue repository housed at the university (see *Nature* 440, 1102–1103; 2006).

There are also concerns about how investigators protect the privacy of patients who donate tissue, and how they give consent for future studies on these tissues. National laws differ on such matters, although several efforts are under way to devise uniform rules. "There's a real movement for harmonization across international barriers," says Mark Sobel, executive officer of the American Society for Investigative Pathology. "I think by 2007 or 2008, we're really going to see some global acceptance for it." ■

Erika Check

Fowler estimates at around $100,000 annually. The trust, which expects the facility to be completed by 2007, will also help developing countries prepare and transport seeds to the Arctic.

The bank will be carved into one of the island's sandstone mountains, and will consist of a 50-metre tunnel leading to a storage facility reinforced with one-metre-thick concrete. Seeds will be wrapped in aluminium foil to keep out moisture. The cave will be protected by two high-security doors armed with motion detectors. No full-time staff will oversee the facility, says Fowler, because it is accessible only by an air-strip about three kilometres away, making it relatively easy to track people's comings and goings.

"It's about providing long-term security for crop plants," says plant scientist Matthew Daws of the Millennium Seed Bank Project at Kew Gardens in London. "It's an insurance policy for countries to deposit some of their collection and have confidence that after thousands of years their seeds will be viable." ■

Jacqueline Ruttimann

ON THE RECORD

"Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers we have not yet thought of."

Cosmologist Stephen Hawking delivers an upbeat assessment of why humans should colonize space.

Source: AP

SCORECARD

▲ **Dirty rats**
A study of sewer rats reveals that they have healthier immune systems than their hygienically protected laboratory cousins, leading scientists to ponder the medical value of filth.

▲ **David Beckham**
A branding study shows that British children are obsessed with celebrities. Top of the pile is the England football captain, who is more on the kids' minds than the toys and clothes marketed at them.

▼ **Sunscreen**
US toxicologists find that nanoparticles used in some sunscreens and cosmetics might be able to cause damage to nerve cells, at least in mice.

OVERHYPED

Chinese engineers
Last autumn, the US National Academies set off alarm bells in Washington with a report claiming, among other things, that China had produced 600,000 engineering graduates last year to America's 70,000. The numbers were compelling enough to help convince President Bush to endorse a multi-billion-dollar 'competitiveness initiative'.

But this week, the academies quietly revised the China number to 350,000 and the US number to 140,000. Why? It seems that the original report was comparing apples with oranges. Or in this case, fully fledged US engineers with the Chinese equivalent of car mechanics.

SIDELINES