Japanese universities fire researchers for misconduct

Two leading Japanese research universities have taken the rare step of firing faculty members who had been the subject of misconduct investigations.

On 20 December, Osaka University dismissed biologist Akio Sugino, three months after its investigation concluded that he fabricated data in two papers on DNA replication (W. Nakai *et al. J. Biol. Chem.* doi:10.1074/jbc.M603586200; 2006 and T. Seki *et al. J. Biol. Chem.* 281, 21422–21432; 2006). Sugino has admitted that he faked the data for the first paper, which was withdrawn in August, but has refused to retract the second.

On 27 December, the University of Tokyo fired biochemist Kazunari Taira and his lab researcher Hiroaki Kawasaki, saying that they had "damaged the university's honour and credit". A university investigation concluded in April 2006 that "there was no reproducibility and no credibility" in four papers on RNA from Taira's lab, although the researchers deny misconduct (see *Nature* 440, 720–721; 2006). It is the first time one of the university's faculty members has been dismissed for research-related problems.

Project BioShield loses supplier for vaccine

The US government has cancelled the biggest and most visible contract under its $5.6-billion Project BioShield programme, telling a small California company that it failed to make agreed progress in developing an anthrax vaccine for civilian biodefence.

The cancellation last month leaves the government without a major supplier of next-generation vaccine. Michael Leavitt, the government's secretary of health and human services, said he would make finding one "a priority".

The company, VaxGen, signed an $878-million contract in 2004 to develop 75 million doses of a recombinant anthrax vaccine. But it has faced chronic problems, and in May said it would deliver the vaccine at least two years late (see *Nature* 441, 281; 2006). The company, which has the right to appeal the termination, says that it is "actively exploring its strategic and legal alternatives".

B. SKLAR/AP

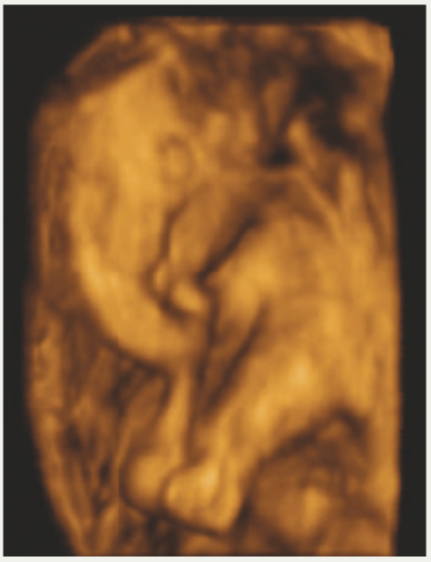
VaxGen has lost its lucrative contract to make anthrax vaccines for the US government.

Media coverage of womb pictures had fetal flaw

Last November, an amazing picture of an elephant inside its mother's womb was carried in newspapers and magazines around the world (see *Nature* **444,** 529; 2006). But what our report and many others failed to mention was that the picture was actually of a silicon model, created with information from ultrasonography.

The images are part of a National Geographic documentary called *In the Womb*. A press release issued by a television channel led to the media reporting several model pictures as ultrasound images of real fetuses.

To correct the error, *Nature* is happy to publish one of the original ultrasound images used to create the models. Just as breathtaking, it was taken by Thomas Hildebrandt of the Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research in Berlin, Germany, and a team at the African Lion Safari in Cambridge, Ontario. This elephant is 125 mm long and weighs just 200 grams, and will continue to gestate for another 16.5 months.



T. B. HILDEBRANDT

Creationists back down over schoolbook stickers

A school board in Cobb County, Georgia, has dropped its fight to get warning labels placed on high-school textbooks that teach evolution.

The stickers, which state that evolution is "a theory, not a fact", were originally approved by the board in 2002, after some parents complained about a new biology textbook. A second group of parents, with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, sued over the stickers, and in 2005 a district judge ruled that they should be removed.

The school board had a right to appeal but decided to abandon the case, in part because of rising costs. The 19 December announcement came almost a year to the day after a federal judge ruled that intelligent design — the concept that an external designer shaped evolution — could not be taught in Dover, Pennsylvania (see *Nature* 439, 6; 2006).

School boards in Texas, Oklahoma and Nevada are mulling over legislation to 'teach the controversy' over evolution in 2007.

Subsidy cuts secure rise for Japan's research budget

The overall budget for science and technology in Japan will decline by 1.8% to ¥3.5 trillion (US$29 billion) for fiscal year 2007, the government announced on 27 December. But the main research budget will increase by 1.1% to ¥1.3 trillion, as cutbacks will focus on administrative expenses and subsidies to universities and research institutes.

Large-scale national projects that began last year, such as advanced supercomputers and an X-ray free-electron laser, will see a substantial increase. Smaller projects — even those in the eight strategic research fields such as the environment — will not see much gain.

The country's life-sciences budget will edge up by 0.5% to ¥68.8 billion, with the big winners including translational research and proteomics. But funding for a project in personalized medicine, including the establishment of a BioBank, will fall by 16% to ¥2.6 billion.

Europe's astronomy club gains a thirteenth member

The Czech Republic — where 400 years ago Johannes Kepler famously deduced that planets move in elliptical orbits around the Sun — has joined the European Southern Observatory (ESO). That makes it the astronomy agency's first member from central or eastern Europe.

On 22 December, Czech education minister Miroslava Kopicová signed an agreement that, when ratified by the country's parliament, will make the Czech Republic a full member. It will be the thirteenth member of the ESO, which was formed in 1962 with five member countries in an attempt to strengthen Europe's research in astronomy and astrophysics.

The ESO operates a number of telescopes at three facilities in the high desert of Chile, including the four 8.2-metre telescopes that comprise the Very Large Telescope.