

Trials halt after gel found to increase HIV risk

Microbicidal gels are one of the great hopes for reducing rates of HIV in women as they are cheap, easy to apply and don't require the consent of male partners. But the news that one of the gels being tested actually increases the risk of infection has shocked scientists and halted clinical trials.

The cellulose sulphate gel, called Ushercell and made by Polydex, based in Toronto, Canada, was in phase III clinical trials involving more than 1,330 women in South Africa, Benin, Uganda and India. The trials were stopped when researchers realized that the infection rate was higher in women using the gel, although the exact figures have not yet been released. As laboratory tests showed that the gel is active against HIV, scientists are at a loss to explain the result. Principal investigator Lut Van Damme calls the findings "unexpected and disappointing".

A separate phase III trial on the same gel in Nigeria has also been stopped as a precautionary measure. Cellulose sulphate is one of four potential anti-HIV microbicides undergoing phase III trials.

Cloners take different views over best recipe

Overtaking conventional wisdom is never simple, and a recent claim that it is easier to make cloned animals from cells that have already become specialized than from adult stem cells has provoked a stern riposte.

Xiangzhong Yang and his team at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, reported the finding last October (L.-Y. Sung *et al.* *Nature Genet.* 38, 1323–1328; 2006). It was surprising because fully differentiated cells are generally thought to be unable

to produce other cell types, whereas stem cells are more flexible. Two stem-cell experts have now published a letter of dissent. "One wonders whether the evidence presented in this paper justifies the sweeping conclusion," write Rudolf Jaenisch of the Whitehead Institute, Cambridge, and Konrad Hochedlinger of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute in Boston (*Nature Genet.* 39, 136–137; 2007).

Jaenisch and Hochedlinger take issue with the way Yang's group measured cloning efficiency, and question whether the cells used were in fact terminally differentiated. They also challenge Yang's claim that he is the first to show that clones can be made from terminally differentiated cells. Yang defends his methods and conclusions, and says further experiments — now under way — will prove him right.

Campaigning for open access gets easier

Organizers of an Internet petition supporting free access to scientific results have hit a nerve. Nearly 18,000 people and institutions have signed up since 17 January. "I think it is one of those interesting viral network sort of effects," says David Prosser, director of the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, Europe (SPARC). "It is everything from graduate students to Nobel prizewinners."

The petition supports the recommendations of a European Union study of January 2006 which called for "public access to publicly funded research results shortly after publication", and urges the European Commission (EC) to make access mandatory for research that it funds. The group intends to present the petition to the EC at a 15 February conference in Brussels on scientific publishing.



Glory days: physicists Edwin McMillan and Edward Lofgren at the Bevatron in 1963.

LAWRENCE BERKELEY NAT'L LAB.

Demolition looms for 'landmark' Bevatron

The Bevatron, the renowned particle accelerator in Berkeley, California, has had its landmark status confirmed — but can be knocked down anyway.

On 1 February, the city council upheld its earlier ruling allowing Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory to demolish the accelerator, where the antiproton was discovered in 1955. The lab wants to tear down the ageing facility to make way for other projects, but local activists, who opposed demolition on environmental grounds, argued that it should be left as a landmark (see *Nature* 442, 612; 2006).

The council did, however, recommend that the lab erect a memorial to mark the achievements of the machine, which operated for more than 40 years. Demolition is not expected before 2008.

Academic starts hunger strike for tenure at MIT

Biologist James Sherley, a black associate professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Cambridge, began a hunger strike on 5 February in protest at being denied tenure because of what he claims is racial bias at the institute.

MIT stands by its decision to deny Sherley tenure, and insists that the decision process was fair. Provost Rafael Reif said in an e-mail to students and faculty members that he and MIT president Susan Hockfield "are deeply committed to removing barriers that may exist for under-represented minority faculty members", and that a committee will be formed to study potential racial bias in the institute's hiring and career-advancement procedures.

But Sherley, a stem-cell researcher in the university's biological engineering department, is unimpressed. "I don't think the committee exists," he says. Sherley has begun his hunger strike in the corridor outside the provost's office.

Japanese nets threaten grey whale's survival

Japan is having too many accidents involving the critically endangered western grey whale (*Eschrichtius robustus*), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) warned on 1 February.

A young female grey whale found dead in a fixed net off the northeastern coast last month was the fourth since 2005. Only some 120 western grey whales (pictured) are thought to be left, of which 20–25 are reproductive females. The current death rate is driving the species to imminent extinction, says Carl Gustaf Lundin, head of the IUCN's Global Marine Programme, based in Gland, Switzerland. "It is essential that the causes of net entrapments are investigated thoroughly so that remedial action can be taken," he says. Japan's Fisheries Agency will order more detailed analyses of any further deaths, but says it has no plans to take action to prevent entrapments.



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