

FDA proposes tighter rules on conflicts of interest

After a flurry of criticism for perceived conflicts of interest, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is planning to significantly tighten the rules that govern when financial conflicts should exclude experts from serving on its external advisory committees. The committees are important because the agency nearly always follows their advice on approving drugs and devices and on emerging safety issues.

In its draft policy released on 21 March, the FDA said that individuals will generally be excluded from participating on advisory committees if they have financial interests exceeding \$50,000 in the issue being discussed. Experts with financial interests of less than \$50,000 might be allowed to participate in discussions without voting, the agency said. The draft proposal is open for public comment until 21 May.

Flu study faces shake-up over industry funding

Japan's health ministry is expected to remove two researchers from its eight-member study group on influenza, because their research in other areas was partly funded by a Japanese distributor of the flu drug Tamiflu.

The study of some 10,000 children will investigate the possible side effects of Tamiflu (oseltamivir) as part of its remit.

The health ministry last week warned doctors not to give Tamiflu to teenagers, after a number of new reports linked the drug to psychiatric effects such as suicidal tendencies among the age group (see *Nature* doi:10.1038/446358a; 2007). Swiss drug firm Roche, which makes Tamiflu, says that no such causal link has been established, and the World Health Organization says Tamiflu remains the drug of choice for treating people infected with the bird flu virus H5N1.

Shunpei Yokota of Yokohama City University, the study group's leader, and Tsuneo Morishima of Okayama

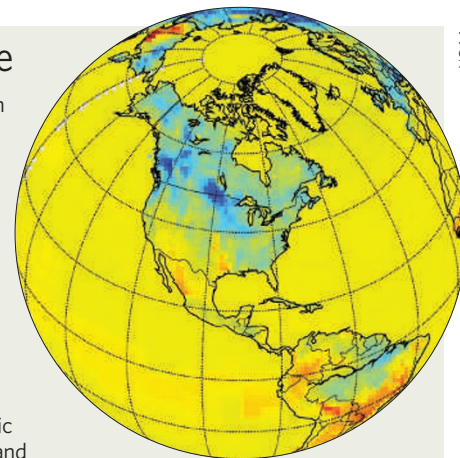


The Japanese government wants to investigate the possible side effects of flu drug Tamiflu.

On the track of carbon dioxide

It's still pretty raw, but an online tool to track carbon dioxide emissions is being set up by the US government. The new CarbonTracker website (<http://carbontracker.noaa.gov>) is meant to provide a public-friendly view of greenhouse-gas emissions from various sources around the world. The snapshot on the right shows CO₂ uptake for a week in July 2005 — dark blue represents the strongest CO₂ sinks.

So far, though, the data are sparse. Only 60 carbon monitoring sites worldwide are included, with 20 of them in the United States. Project scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration say they hope to add further sites and eventually develop CarbonTracker into a resource for policy-makers and scientists.



NOAA

University have received some ¥12 million (US\$100,000) between them from Tokyo-based Chugai Pharmaceutical, which distributes products for Roche. Health minister Hakuo Yanagisawa told a parliamentary committee on 23 March that the researchers ought to be excluded from the flu study.

UK league table revisits problems caused by drugs

Alcohol and tobacco are better than heroin but worse than cannabis, according to a UK ranking of the dangers of recreational drugs (D. Nutt *et al. Lancet* 369, 1047–1053; 2007).

The new system is an attempt to provide a scientific — if still simplistic — way to compare the social and health tolls taken by recreational drugs. Current British drug laws are shaped by political prejudice as much as by the actual threats posed by the substances, says team member David Nutt of the University of Bristol.

His team asked experts — including psychiatrists specializing in addiction, the police, forensic experts and doctors — to give up to 20 drugs a score in nine subcategories within the larger categories of physical harm, dependence and social harm.

The result? Heroin and cocaine were ranked as the most dangerous, reflecting their status as class A drugs — the most harmful tier of Britain's three-category system. But ecstasy, another class A drug, finished eighteenth in their list — below commercial solvents and anabolic steroids.

Budget gives Canadian science a cash injection

Canada's science infrastructure got a boost last week with the release of the country's budget plan for 2007.

The two main science granting agencies — the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and the Canadian

Institutes of Health Research — will each get an extra Can\$37 million (US\$32 million), raising their combined budgets to roughly Can\$1.4 billion. A further Can\$510 million is allocated to modernize the research infrastructure at universities and other research institutions. And Genome Canada will receive an extra Can\$100 million for grants and regional genome centres.

Another winner, to the tune of Can\$50 million, is the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics in Waterloo, Ontario. Seven other targeted institutes, including some focusing on neurology and sustainable energy, will share an extra Can\$105 million.

SpaceX rocket burns up after missing orbit

The privately financed Falcon 1 launch vehicle reached an altitude of 300 kilometres last week before developing problems and burning up on re-entry into Earth's atmosphere. But space-industry experts say the test should be considered a success.

Falcon 1 was developed by the California-based company SpaceX as a rapid way of getting satellites into orbit. Space launches usually take months of planning, but industry observers say Falcon 1 should be turned around quickly because SpaceX has used a simple design that the firm says will eventually be operated by as few as 15 staff.

SpaceX is investigating why the Falcon 1 vehicle developed a rolling motion during the flight, which caused its engines to shut down, about 6 minutes after launching from the Marshall Islands on 20 March. The company is still aiming for another launch later this year to put a US Department of Defense satellite into orbit.

Correction

Our News in Brief story 'Upstart forum created for German conferences' (*Nature* 446, 360; 2007) contained an incorrect reference to an earlier story on the topic. The correct reference is *Nature* 433, 446 (2005).