

Genome deal seeks to accelerate pore sequencing

Biotechnology company Illumina of San Diego, California, has bought exclusive rights to market, sell and distribute products based on the DNA sequencing technology of UK-based Oxford Nanopore Technologies (see *Nature* 456, 23–25; 2008).

Unlike conventional methods, the technique identifies sequences by passing DNA one base at a time through a tiny pore made from a protein. The process does not involve molecular tagging or intricate sample preparation, and the companies hope that it will ultimately allow them to sequence an entire human genome for less than US\$1,000.

The deal includes an initial investment of \$18 million from Illumina, followed by a second cash injection once Oxford Nanopore has demonstrated the commercial scope of the technique. Both firms will share profits from any sales.

Obama urged to make exports and visas a priority

The US National Research Council (NRC) has called on president-elect Barack Obama to overhaul the country's export-control

system and to ease the visa process for foreign scientists.

In a report published on 8 January, the council warns that US security and economic growth are threatened by outdated export-control regulations, which restrict the flow of certain technologies and information to other countries. Rather

than leaving items on the export-control list indefinitely, the NRC wants to see a 'sunset' rule imposed to reassess each item annually.

The report was co-chaired by former US national security adviser Brent Scowcroft and John Hennessy, president of Stanford University in California. It also suggests that Obama should speed up the processing of

Scheduling problems beset delayed Mars mission

NASA's delayed Mars Science Laboratory mission (pictured) is experiencing further problems as it jostles for space in a crowded launch schedule.

The nuclear-powered rover, which will search for evidence of past life on Mars, is due to launch at the end of 2011, two years later than planned.

But the mission's first possible launch window, in October, would be tightly constrained by the August 2011 launch of Juno, a mission to study Jupiter's magnetic and gravitational fields. A second launch window is available in December, but that would favour landing sites in Mars's northern hemisphere, potentially reopening the debate over what part of the planet the rover should explore. Resolving the dilemma could add US\$50 million to the already vastly over-budget mission, now expected to cost up to \$2.3 billion over its lifetime.

For a longer version of this story, see <http://tinyurl.com/9j3ptj>.



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visa applications for foreign researchers and give international science and engineering students an automatic one-year visa extension to seek work or advanced study.

Suspended urologist set to return to Austrian university

The urologist at the centre of Austria's biggest-ever research scandal can return to work at the Medical University of Innsbruck, a disciplinary committee has ruled.

Hannes Strasser was suspended from clinical, teaching and research duties in September 2008 following accusations of malpractice in a clinical trial using stem cells to treat urinary incontinence (see *Nature* 454, 922; 2008).

The national disciplinary committee responsible for university staff has now concluded that the suspension was not legally justified, as more than three years had passed since the alleged misdemeanour occurred.

Strasser, who is facing criminal charges relating to harming patients or putting them at risk of harm, is on paid leave until the end of January. He will not be allowed to treat patients until the criminal case is resolved — which is likely to take at least a year. An investigation by the Austrian National Academy of Sciences is also ongoing.

Coal conversion plant fires up in China

China's first coal-liquefaction plant is up and running. Located in Inner Mongolia, the facility is run by the state-owned Shenhua Group.

According to a statement issued by Shenhua last week, the plant has been turning coal into liquid fuel and chemical products since December. The technique, which is also widely used in South Africa, has been criticized for its high emissions of carbon dioxide.

Last year, the Chinese government issued a moratorium on new coal-liquefaction facilities, but allowed Shenhua to complete its Mongolia plant and continue work on a second. The company says it is developing ways to capture and store the CO₂ emitted during the process.

Italian universities lose freedom to appoint staff

Italian universities will have little say in choosing their own professors thanks to a law approved by parliament last week.

According to the new rules, a five-person selection committee will oversee each

appointment. But a university recruiting a professor can appoint only one member to the board. The other four members will be picked at random from a list of twelve voted for by the relevant community of scientists across Italy.

The existing *concorsi* system is similar, but it allowed universities to have more control over selection — a privilege that was sometimes abused to make appointments based on local politics rather than on merit. Many academics had lobbied for a reform that would allow universities to make their own free choice, but lose funds if their chosen professors underperformed.

Corrections

The News round-up item 'Biodiversity gets catalogued online' (*Nature* 456, 844–845; 2008) gave incorrect funding numbers for the Encyclopedia of Life. The total budget for the project's first five years is US\$50 million; \$2.5 million came from the Sloan Foundation and \$10 million from the MacArthur Foundation in 2007.

The News story 'Good grades, but who gets the cash?' (*Nature* 457, 13; 2009) incorrectly calculated the number of staff submitted by the University of Oxford who were rated world-leading and internationally excellent in the biological-sciences category of the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. The correct number is 75, putting the university in second place behind the University of Cambridge.