

SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

POLICY

Stem-cell ruling

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has now been given legal backing for its attempts to regulate a US clinic that offers therapies involving a patient's processed stem cells. Such treatments can now be classified as drugs, a US District Court in Washington DC ruled on 23 July, in relation to the FDA's injunction against Regenerative Sciences, a stem-cell clinic in Broomfield, Colorado. The ruling could pave the way for the agency to regulate other stem-cell clinics. See page 14 for more.

Data exemption

A cross-party group of politicians has recommended that England's laws on freedom of information be modified to protect universities from having to release data prematurely. The nation's universities have complained that the Freedom of Information Act might be used to force the release of research findings and data before they are ready for publication. On 26 July, Parliament's Justice Select Committee agreed, saying that the existing 'pre-publication exemption' section of the act should be amended. See go.nature.com/cf1fia for more.

Lab-death charges

A landmark criminal prosecution over an accident in a US academic laboratory reached a partial conclusion on 27 July. In a deal that saw criminal charges dropped, the regents of the University of California accepted responsibility for laboratory conditions three-and-a-half years ago, when 23-year-old Sheharbano Sangji died in a lab fire at the University of California, Los Angeles. The regents also agreed to put in place stringent safety measures



T. ALLOFS/MINDEN PICTURES/EPFA

India curbs tiger tourism

India's Supreme Court has placed an interim ban on tourists visiting central parts of the country's 40 or so tiger reserves, to protect the dwindling population of the endangered big cats. The 24 July ruling — which the court will re-examine on 22 August — still allows tourists into fringe areas of reserves ('buffer zones'). Park managers said that the ruling would devastate tourism

in some national reserves, but that other parks would hardly be affected, because they already keep core areas off-limits. The order came in response to a petition from conservationist Ajay Dubey at the non-governmental organization Prayatna in Bhopal. According to a 2010 census, India is home to about 1,700 wild tigers — more than half of the world's total.

and to set up a US\$500,000 environmental-law scholarship in Sangji's name. But charges remain against Sangji's supervisor, the organic chemist Patrick Harran; his case has been postponed until 5 September. See go.nature.com/hmoden for more.

Industry ties

Doubt has been cast on a supposedly independent study into the risks of fracking (the pumping of high-pressure fluids into shale to force out natural gas) after its lead author confirmed last week that he is on the board of directors for an energy company actively involved in the practice, a position that earned him more than US\$400,000 last year. Charles Groat, of the University

of Texas at Austin, did not disclose his industry ties when the report (see go.nature.com/sopiwm) was released in February. The university says that it is reviewing the study. See page 5 for more.

EVENTS

Ebola outbreak

The first widespread outbreak of Ebola haemorrhagic fever since 2009 has killed 14 people in the Kibaale district of western Uganda, the World Health Organization said on 29 July. Twenty cases have been reported since the beginning of July, but the presence of ebolavirus was not officially confirmed until last week. After the virus spread to the capital, Kampala, Ugandan President

Yoweri Museveni told people to avoid physical contact. According to the Uganda Virus Research Institute in Entebbe, the outbreak involves the Sudan subtype of the virus, which in a 2000–01 Ugandan outbreak killed 224 people — 53% of identified cases.

Greenland melt

Satellite observations revealed massive surface melting across the Greenland ice sheet last month as a dome of unusually hot air settled over the region, NASA scientists announced on 24 July. Between 8 and 12 July, the area subject to melting increased from 40% to 97% of the ice sheet — an extent unprecedented in three decades of space observations. The previous record was 55%. But

POLARIS/EVINE the event falls within the realm of natural variability: ice-core records suggest that extreme melting occurs roughly once every 150 years, with the most recent event in 1889.

RESEARCH

Warming redux

The Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature (BEST) study released the second part of its independent analysis of the global land-surface-temperature record on 29 July. The findings — that the planet has warmed over the past 250 years owing to human influence — are not news to climate scientists. But team leader Richard Muller, a physicist at the University of California, Berkeley, is being criticized by researchers for publicizing the BEST results before they have been peer reviewed. The BEST team has not yet published any of its findings in journals, despite posting its first results online last October. See go.nature.com/euvydr for more.

FUNDING

Antarctica upgrade

US research facilities in Antarctica, such as the *Polar Star* icebreaker (pictured), need an overhaul, says a report to the US National Science Foundation, released on 23 July. To pay for the upgrade,



the authors recommend that the roughly US\$300-million budget for the US Antarctic Program (USAP) be increased by 6%, and that the programme divert 6% of its planned science spending to infrastructure. The USAP devotes nine times more person days in Antarctica to logistics efforts than it does to actual research, and after the upgrade, the balance should tilt more towards research, the authors add. See go.nature.com/dvb9y9 for more.

PEOPLE

Nuclear safety

Japan's new nuclear regulatory commission will probably be headed by radiation physicist Shunichi Tanaka. On 26 July, a parliamentary committee (covering both lower and upper houses) proposed Tanaka as head of the commission, which will be launched in September and will be affiliated with the environment ministry. But some observers objected to Tanaka, a former deputy chair of the cabinet's Japan

Atomic Energy Commission, accusing him of being too close to the nuclear industry and playing down the health risks from last year's disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

Museum head

The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC has announced its next director: Kirk Johnson, a geologist who specializes in plant fossils from the Cretaceous period. Johnson currently serves as vice-president of research and collections and as chief curator at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science in Colorado. He will take on the Smithsonian museum's US\$68-million budget and 126 million artefacts and specimens on 29 October. Johnson replaces Cristián Samper, who stepped down on 23 January to head the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York.

Misconduct charge

A once high-flying Danish neuroscientist, Milena Penkowa, is suspected of "potentially intentional misconduct" involving 15 research papers, according to a leaked report from an international committee investigating her case. The report — published on 25 July by Danish newspaper *BT* but due to be released officially

COMING UP

6 AUGUST

NASA tries to land its Curiosity rover on Mars. See page 16 for more. mars.jpl.nasa.gov/msl

5–10 AUGUST

The Ecological Society of America meets in Portland, Oregon, to discuss preserving, utilizing and sustaining Earth's ecosystems. www.esa.org/portland

in August — had been requested by the University of Copenhagen, Penkowa's former employer, in February 2011. Penkowa had already resigned and been sentenced for embezzling money from the Danish Society for Neuroscience. Two of her papers have been officially retracted, and a report from the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty is also expected later in summer. See go.nature.com/eakrbd for more.

Physics millions

A lucrative prize for fundamental physics was launched on 31 July, with nine researchers each receiving US\$3 million. The prize is sponsored by Yuri Milner, a Russian billionaire who once studied for a physics PhD. Milner chose the first winners: Alan Guth, Andrei Linde, Nima Arkani-Hamed, Juan Maldacena, Nathan Seiberg, Edward Witten, Alexei Kitaev, Maxim Kontsevich and Ashoke Sen, who will, in turn, select future winners. The prize will be announced annually and is accompanied by an ad hoc award for 'exceptional cases' and a \$100,000 prize for promising junior researchers. See go.nature.com/mwaays for more.

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TREND WATCH

US venture capitalists seem to be avoiding the biotechnology sector in favour of information technology, according to numbers released on 20 July in the US National Venture Capital Association's 'MoneyTree' report. Investments in biotech firms dropped to a 9-year low of around US\$700 million in the second quarter of 2012. And they accounted for fewer than 10% of all venture-capital deals in that quarter — a much lower proportion than usual (see chart).

BIOTECH VENTURE-CAPITAL DIPS

Investment in biotechnology firms by US venture capitalists dropped sharply in the first half of 2012.

