

# SEVEN DAYS

The news in brief

## BUSINESS

### Stem-cell safety

Asterias Biotherapeutics reported cautious good news from early-stage trials of an embryonic-stem-cell treatment for the most severe forms of spinal-cord injury on 31 August. Three people with injuries that left them with no feeling from the neck down were injected with low doses of oligodendrocytes — cells derived from embryonic stem cells and that support nerve growth. None experienced serious side effects, and the first participant, operated on in June, showed minor improvements in sensory function. The company, based in Menlo Park, California, plans to increase the number of cells in a dose, hoping to increase the effect.

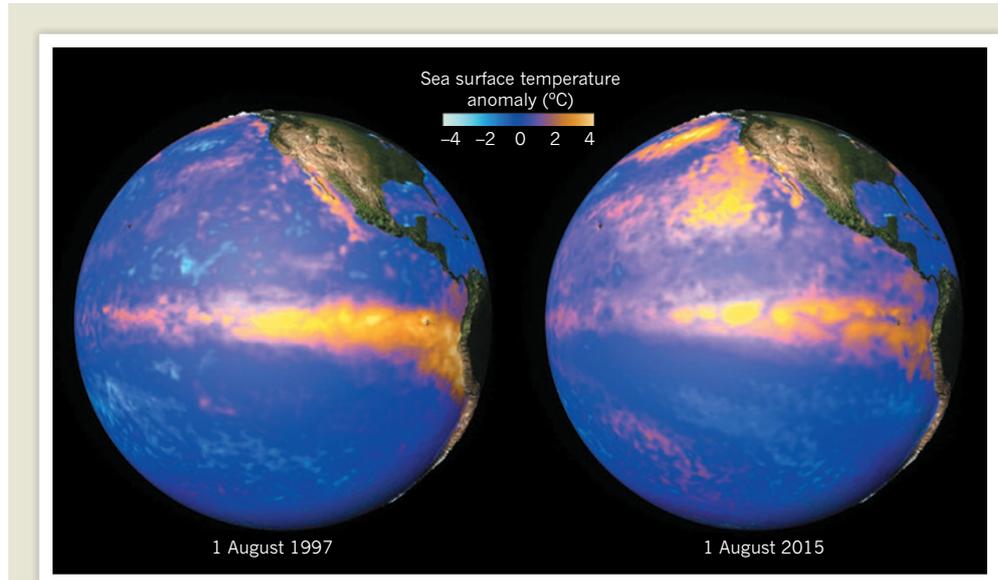
## POLICY

### Ethics revisited

US agencies are working to update ethics rules that regulate biomedical research on humans. On 2 September, the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced a proposal to revise the 'Common Rule' policy, which governs human-subjects research at 18 US federal departments and agencies. The proposal calls for a single ethical review of research conducted at multiple sites, and more-stringent consent procedures for the use of specimens donated to biobanks. The HHS proposal opened for a 90-day public comment period on 8 September. See [go.nature.com/cbd53s](http://go.nature.com/cbd53s) for more.

### Anthrax review

The US Secretary of the Army has ordered a safety review of all nine Department of Defense laboratories that handle dangerous biological agents.



## El Niño on track to be record-breaking

A comparison of the El Niño weather pattern in 1997 and 2015 shows how the two had developed in a strikingly similar fashion by August in each of the years. Sea-surface temperature data from the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, shows each El Niño as a band of warmer-than-usual water (orange) along the

eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean — with added warmth to the north in 2015. The 1997 event was the strongest in recent memory; the 2015 one now seems as if it could break that record (see *Nature* <http://doi.org/7h6>; 2015). The peak of the event is forecast for late autumn or early winter in the Northern Hemisphere.

The 2 September order follows a problem discovered during an ongoing investigation into a military lab at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah, which in May accidentally shipped live anthrax to a commercial lab. The current investigation found the bacteria outside the normal containment area at Dugway, although still within the confines of the enclosed lab used for dangerous agents. Labs must deliver their safety reports within 10 days of the order.

### Climate appeal

The Dutch government will appeal a landmark ruling on its climate policies, it announced on 1 September. In June, a district court in The Hague declared that the Netherlands must reduce its domestic greenhouse-gas

emissions by at least 25% by 2020, relative to 1990 levels. At present, the Netherlands is on track to achieve a 17% reduction in emissions by 2020, relative to 1990, in line with European Union obligations. A letter from the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment to the chairman of the House of Representatives argued that the court's verdict might be incompatible with international law. The deadline for appeal is 24 September.

### CRISPR endorsed

Five leading UK research organizations have backed work on human-genome editing. The consortium, which includes the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council, wants to see further debate on the ethics of using

gene-editing technologies such as CRISPR/Cas9, it said in a 2 September statement. These technologies are not yet ready for clinical trials, but the group says that it will continue to fund and support them. In the United Kingdom, genome-editing research is limited at present to non-reproductive cells and human embryos less than 14 days old.

## RESEARCH

### Super Stonehenge

Researchers have discovered a 5,000-year-old row of at least 90 stones at the prehistoric monument of Stonehenge near Salisbury, UK. Found within 3 kilometres of the famous stone circle using non-invasive technologies, some of the stones are as long

VISUALIZATION BY MATT REHME, NATIONAL CENTER FOR ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH/UCAR

JOHN MOORE/GETTY

as 4.5 metres, the Stonehenge Hidden Landscapes Project announced on 7 September. Its construction could date to about 3,000 BC, the same as Stonehenge. The stones seem to have been purposely buried under the earthworks of the existing Durrington Walls mega-henge. The remnants have not yet been excavated but the team hopes that they will improve understanding of the Neolithic period.

## Forest loss halved

The world's forest area declined at a rate of 3.3 million hectares per year between 2010 and 2015, according to the latest global assessment from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. However, this is well below the 7.3 million hectares lost per year in the 1990s (R. J. Keenan *et al.* *Forest Ecol. Mgmt* **352**, 9–20; 2015). FAO director-general José Graziano da Silva called the slow-down in deforestation an “encouraging tendency” when he launched the report in Durban, South Africa, on 7 September, but stressed that more still needs to be done.

## AWARDS

### Lasker awards

The 70th Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation awards were announced on 8 September. Evelyn Witkin of Rutgers



University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Stephen Elledge of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston, Massachusetts, shared the award in basic medical research for their studies into how cells respond to and correct DNA damage. James Allison of the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Dallas won the clinical medical research award for work on cancer immunotherapies. The public-service award went to the humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières for its work in battling the 2014 Ebola epidemic in Africa (pictured).

## EVENTS

### Iran deal secured

US President Barack Obama has secured enough Democratic-party votes from the US Senate for July's multilateral deal on Iran's nuclear programme to survive Republican opposition. Republicans are opposed to the deal, and are planning a resolution of disapproval. To stop the resolution completely, the Obama administration needs 41 out of 100 votes in the Senate. But if he gets at least 34 votes in the deal's favour, Obama can veto the disapproval resolution. As of 7 September, 38 Democratic senators supported the deal.

### Polio comeback

Two children have become paralysed in Europe's first polio cases in five years, the World Health Organization reported on 1 September. The cases — in a 10-month-old and a 4-year-old near Ukraine's southwestern borders with Romania, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland — were caused by viruses that are mutated relatives of those in the live polio vaccine. Such vaccine-derived strains are the result of low immunization coverage, but are considered easier to control than outbreaks of wild polio virus. Last year, just half

## COMING UP

### 14–16 SEPTEMBER

Guidelines for using satellite observations to reduce disaster risk are under discussion at the United Nations International Conference on Space-based Technologies for Disaster Management in Beijing.

[go.nature.com/nw3k5r](http://go.nature.com/nw3k5r)

### 14–25 SEPTEMBER

The theory of a world with many dimensions will be debated at length at the Stringy Geometry meeting at the Mainz Institute for Theoretical Physics, Germany.

[go.nature.com/ahdgrg](http://go.nature.com/ahdgrg)

### 15–19 SEPTEMBER

Experts in cell death gather at Cold Spring Harbor, New York.

[go.nature.com/lhszuw](http://go.nature.com/lhszuw)

of Ukrainian children received full immunizations against polio and other preventable diseases.

### Radar retired

One of the two science instruments aboard NASA's US\$916-million Soil Moisture Active Passive (SMAP) satellite was declared dead on 2 September. SMAP was launched in January to produce frequent global maps of soil moisture. But its radar instrument, which measures energy reflecting off Earth's surface, stopped transmitting on 7 July. The problem seems to be with the radar's power-boosting amplifier. SMAP's other science instrument, a radiometer, still works, but losing the radar means that the soil-moisture maps (including freezing and thawing cycles) will be of coarser resolution than planned.

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## TREND WATCH

Two Europe-wide surveys done 8 years apart of people at risk of heart disease show that the proportion who smoke remains the same at 17%. But of those, the proportion who do not intend to stop smoking has risen sharply from 23% to 34%. The EUROASPIRE surveys were run by the European Society of Cardiology in 2006–07 and 2014–15. In total, 5,890 people in Bulgaria, Croatia, Poland, Romania and the United Kingdom were surveyed, and 3,827 participated in both surveys.

### NO INTENTION TO QUIT

Since the last survey in 2006–07, the number of people at highest risk of heart disease who smoke has stayed the same, but the number of those who do not intend to stop has increased.

