

EVENTS

Forensic-data check

Forensic evidence in more than 10,000 UK criminal cases is being retested following evidence of data manipulation at Randox Testing Services, a private laboratory firm. Two former employees of the company, which reported itself to Manchester police after an internal investigation, have been released on bail. No information was disclosed about the nature of the data manipulation, but a spokesperson for Britain's National Police Chiefs' Council said that retesting is under way at five accredited labs. The manipulated samples included blood, urine and hair provided as evidence in cases that mostly involved drug-driving offences, but also sexual offences, violent crimes and unexplained deaths. The government's forensics regulator says that a subsequent audit of other labs found no further problems.

Water woes

A project to restore water to Australia's largest river system has improved some rivers, but has not yet benefited the basin's health overall, according to the first independent assessment of the plan, released on 30 November. The Aus\$13-billion (US\$9.9-billion) project aims to repair damage done by decades of extracting too much water from the Murray-Darling Basin in the nation's southeast, which produces about one-third of Australia's food supply and contains important wetlands. But the review, by the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists in Sydney, concludes that the plan is unlikely to meet its 2026 target of returning 3.2 trillion litres of water to the



SONNY TUMBELAKA/AFP/GETTY

Bali volcano prompts mass evacuation

The Agung volcano on the Indonesian island of Bali erupted on 25 November, covering nearby villages in ash and forcing tens of thousands of residents to evacuate. The volcanic plume eventually rose more than 3 kilometres into the air, resulting in cancelled flights at the island's

airport, a major tourist hub. It was the largest eruption since the volcano began rumbling with a series of small earthquakes in September. Agung's last eruption, in 1963, was one of the most powerful of the twentieth century, killing more than 1,000 people with superheated debris.

system. About two-thirds of the water has been returned, the report says, but most of this occurred before the project started in 2012.

PEOPLE

Call for release

Seventy-eight Nobel prizewinners have demanded that the Iranian authorities release a disaster-medicine researcher who was sentenced to death in Iran last month. Ahmadrza Djalali, an Iranian national who was affiliated to institutions in Italy and Sweden, was arrested in Tehran in April 2016 and accused of collaboration with a hostile government. After a trial in Iran's revolutionary court, he was convicted of espionage and sentenced. In a 17 November letter to

Gholamali Khoshroo, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, that was made public last week, the Nobel laureates expressed concern about the conditions of Djalali's detention, and deemed his trial "unfair" and "flawed".

FACILITIES

Light machine

The Middle East's first synchrotron light source began its experimental programme on 22 November. Synchrotron-light for Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME), near Amman, Jordan, produces beams of intense radiation for use in research ranging from solid-state physics to archaeology. SESAME's first beamline, one of a potential 24, will probe

materials using X-rays. The US\$110-million machine, built by a collaboration that includes Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Pakistan, the Palestinian Authority and Turkey, will ramp up to its optimum brightness over the coming months. A second beam, in the infrared, is set to start up by the end of the year.

POLICY

Illicit gene therapy

The sale of kits that let consumers edit their own genomes is illegal in the United States, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in a 21 November statement. The FDA is concerned about safety risks from genome-editing tools and other gene-therapy

TESLA products — including “do it yourself” kits currently on the market. Such treatments can be performed only in approved clinical trials unless they have received FDA approval, the agency said. The FDA has not said whether it intends to crack down on the sale of such products, or which laws it could enforce to prevent people from using genome-editing tools for personal purposes.

UK industrial plan

The United Kingdom published its industrial strategy on 27 November, a plan that it hopes will boost the country's economy, mainly through investment in research. The document identifies four areas of technology to focus on: artificial intelligence and big data; clean growth; the future of mobility; and meeting the needs of an ageing society. See page 551 for more.

EU weedkiller vote

In a long-awaited decision, the European Union's member states have voted to allow the controversial herbicide glyphosate to be sold and used in the bloc for another five years. The vote, taken on 27 November, came weeks before the product's current licence was due to expire on 15 December, and it ends two years of fierce division



among the 28 EU countries. In March 2015, a World Health Organization agency concluded glyphosate was “probably carcinogenic” to humans, but many international regulatory agencies have concluded that it is not. Eighteen countries voted in favour of the five-year extension, nine voted against and one abstained.

TECHNOLOGY

Giant battery

Tesla has finished installing the world's largest lithium-ion battery at a wind farm roughly 200 kilometres north of Adelaide, the government of South Australia announced on 23 November. When testing is complete, it will supply electricity to the grid during periods of increased demand that could otherwise cause blackouts. Seen as an alternative to further investment in fossil fuels, the battery (pictured) will be able to power 30,000

houses for eight hours. The milestone puts Tesla, based in Palo Alto, California, on track to meet a self-imposed completion deadline of 100 days. Elon Musk, the firm's chief executive, had vowed on Twitter to meet this deadline or to make the system free.

Self-driven vehicles

Singapore's first research centre for autonomous vehicles opened on 22 November. The centre, operated by Nanyang Technological University, includes a test environment of simulated city streets. Local start-up nuTonomy and Delphi Automotive of Kent, UK, have been testing self-driving taxis on Singapore roads since 2016 and will begin using the centre soon; more firms are expected to start testing there within six months. The city state's transport ministry also announced plans for driverless buses to enter service in 2022 in three areas.

PUBLISHING

Editorial board quits

The 22-member editorial board of a public-health journal has resigned over a dispute with its publisher. The *International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, owned by UK publishers Taylor & Francis, disseminates research on health effects of pollution. A row over its direction began in March, when long-time editor-in-chief David Egilman was replaced by Andrew Maier, a former chemical-industry consultant. Board members say that Maier was appointed without their consultation. In a resignation letter to Taylor & Francis dated 22 November, they say that the publisher also withdrew “approved or printed” articles. The retracted papers include a 2016 study by Egilman on how industry-sponsored research tends to downplay the health hazards of products such as asbestos (D. S. Egilman *Int. J. Occup. Environ. Health* **22**, 18–26; 2016).

UNIVERSITIES

UK research audit

The United Kingdom's next national research assessment will be tweaked in ways intended to prevent attempts to ‘game’ the system. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) takes place every few years to evaluate the quality of university research; funding agencies use the results to allocate around £2 billion (US\$2.7 billion) in annual research money. The changes to the next REF, scheduled for 2021 and confirmed by research-funding agencies on 21 November, take into account the recommendations made in a 2016 review, which looked for ways to cut costs and stop the exercise from warping the research system. The new measures include ensuring that all UK researchers are assessed, rather than just those selected by universities.

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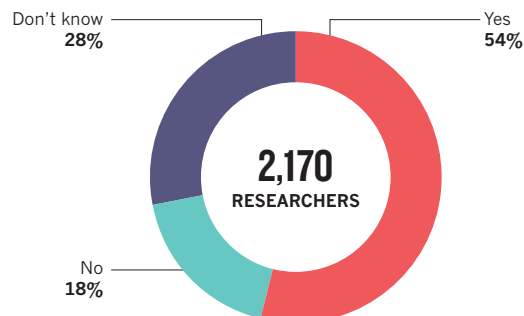
TREND WATCH

A worldwide survey of more than 2,100 researchers found that 54% supported the creation of a global research-funding body similar to the European Research Council. The poll, published on 23 November, measured opinions about the possible impacts on research of Britain's departure from the European Union. More than 70% supported the UK government maintaining freedom of movement for EU researchers in Britain after Brexit. And 65% supported involving the academic sector in exit negotiations.

GLOBAL RESEARCH COUNCIL?

In a survey of more than 2,000 researchers worldwide, most favoured the idea of creating a global research-funding body similar to the European Research Council.

“Should a global research body be formed over the next 5–10 years?”



Respondents: 1,242 UK-based, 452 based in the European Union, 476 non-EU-based.