FDA withholds xeno data

The Campaign for Responsible Transplantation (CRT; New York) filed a lawsuit late in November against the FDA claiming officials are withholding information on xenotransplantation research. Following Freedom of Information Act requests that began last March, CRT director Alix Fano has been leading the campaign against the FDA to divulge documents. FDA officials note that federal law prohibits the agency from releasing such information, but Fano says that because some sponsors of xenotransplant clinical trials are selectively releasing information through the press and public presentations, FDA is in effect waiving rights to confidentiality, particularly in cases involving adverse events.

Federal guidelines for xenotransplantation research describe the development of a pilot national database, with the possibility of establishing a comprehensive system for collecting such information. In addition, a new advisory committee on xenotransplantation is expected to provide an additional public forum for considering such research (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **18**, 699). *JF*

French ethics law revised

The French government has proposed changes to its 1994 Bioethics law to allow research on human embryos and facilitate the development of new therapies from work on embryonic stem cells (ESCs). Under the amended law, researchers will be able to derive stem cells from "spare" embryos leftover from in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedures, and the use of nuclear transfer technology will be allowed to develop therapeutic applications from ESCs (therapeutic cloning). However, reproductive cloning will remain strictly prohibited. Although the ethics advisory committee to the European Commission stated in November that legalizing therapeutic cloning would be "premature," France looks to be following the UK, which introduced similar legislation in August (*Nat. Biotechnol.***18**, 1034, 2000). The French government also plans to create an advisory Human Reproductive Medicine Agency—similar to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in the UK—to evaluate and authorize research on human reproduction, developmental biology, and genetics. *SL*

Conflicts of interest reports

Conflicts of interest between collaborating academics and private firms are both common and poorly regulated by university officials, according to two new studies (*NEJM*, **343**, 1621, 2000). The first, conducted by researchers at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), looked at the top 10 medical schools receiving funding from the NIH. Only one—UCSF—prohibited researchers from owning stock, stock options, consulting agreements or decision-making positions involving the firms for which they conduct clinical trials. "We don't see a problem with investigators being paid for their time and effort," asserts Bernard Lo, a UCSF medical ethicist and senior author of the study. "It's the stock or options whose value rises and falls that is the problem." Meanwhile, a group at Baylor College of Medicine and Veterans' Affairs Medical Center (Houston, TX) found that only 7% of 250 US medical schools and research institutions, and 43% of 47 science and medical journals surveyed, require financial disclosure in published reports. Moreover, of 11 federal agencies that fund extramural human research, only 4 have policies explicitly addressing conflicts of interest.

Meanwhile, the FDA said in December that it plans to increase the number of inspections of clinical trials, as part of its efforts to better protect volunteers in clinical research (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **18**, 1029, 2000). *EN*

German genomics effort

The first deadline for proposals for a new bacterial genome research initiative in Germany is January 8. Over the next three years, Germany's federal ministry of education and science (BMBF) plans to distribute up to 40 million DM ($US 17.4 million) evenly between three networks comprising scientists from academia and industry investigating bacterial genomes: the first focusing on human and animal pathogens; the second on new production processes in the context of biodiversity; the third on environmental protection, agriculture, and general biotech applications. "This research initiative on bacterial genomes closes a gap in Germany's genome research and complements the already existing German human genome research project (HUGO) and plant genome project (GABI)," explains Ulrich Schlüter, who is responsible for biotechnology research funding at the BMBF. Research that could lead to the development of biological weapons will not be funded. *EP*

Research collaborations

Company 1	Company 2	$ (m)	Details
CropTech (Blacksburg, VA)	Tobio (Richmond, VA)	6.5	A deal to accelerate the commercialization of CropTech's transgenic tobacco technology, and help secure a leading role for Virginia tobacco growers in the resulting high-value market. A farmer-owned subsidiary of the Virginia Farm Bureau Federation, Tobio will furnish tobacco-growing technical assistance to CropTech, purchase $3 million of CropTech's stock, and contribute an additional $3.5 million towards a commercial development program through 2001.
Pfizer (Groton, CT)	Avant (Needham, MA)	5.5	An agreement to develop vaccines to protect animals from bacterial diseases and to help control food borne pathogens in livestock. Pfizer will make a $3 million equity investment in Avant, and will pay $2.5 million for an exclusive license to Avant's oral vaccine technology. The companies will conduct a joint research program funded by Pfizer, and Avant will receive royalties on sales of any products resulting from the collaboration.
Roslin Institute (Edinburgh, UK)	Viragen (Plantation, FL)	*	A deal to therapeutically clone chickens so that egg whites will be rich in proteins, such as anti-cancer monoclonal antibodies. Roslin's nuclear transfer technology will combine with Viragen's technology in antibodies and anti-cancer agents to create "Robbie and Britney" and other cocks and hens for production of a wide variety of high-volume, low-cost drugs.
Celera (Rockville, MD)	Diversa (San Diego, CA)	*	A multi-year, cross-royalty agreement to sequence the genomes and discover the genes of selected, uncultured organisms to enhance drug discovery. Celera's industrial-scale biology systems will sequence the microbes Diversa has gathered from extreme environments—Russia and Africa, among others—for entry into Diversa's high-throughput screening and directed evolution systems.

*Financial details not disclosed

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