

US budget for 2005 boosts biodefense, food security

Biodefense, food security and biosurveillance will receive significant increases in funding under the proposed US budget for 2005.

The US Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other agencies, would receive \$571.6 billion, a 6% increase over the 2004 budget.

The NIH would get about \$28.8 billion, including approximately \$1.7 billion for biodefense research. The NIH would also fund 258 new grants, but would limit the amount of each grant.

The budget would provide approximately \$6.9 billion to the CDC. Some money would fund the CDC's role in a new interagency biosurveillance program for natural outbreaks and bioterrorist attacks.

The FDA would receive around \$1.8 billion. Funds would be available for food safety and for safeguards against bovine spongiform encephalopathy, adopted after the discovery of an infected cow (*Nat. Med.* 10, 113; 2004) in Washington State in December. —AS

UK tissue bill vague and confusing, scientists charge

UK scientists are protesting the proposed Human Tissue Bill, which makes the removal and storage of organs and tissue samples illegal unless written consent is obtained from the patient or a relative.

The bill, which will become law this month, allows for some exceptions. But researchers say the bill's language—including the section on sampling tissues from living patients—is confusing. In a statement, Mark Walport, director of UK's Wellcome Trust, said the bill does not have a "definition of consent and it is vague about the analysis of fresh DNA samples, criminal liability and licensing." The bill was drafted after an investigation found a Liverpool hospital had retained children's organs for research without permission.

Meanwhile, the US Food and Drug Administration in January implemented rules for companies working with reproductive tissue and human cellular products, including stem cells derived from various blood sources. The policy mandates that tissue banks register with the agency and list their products. —AS

Nigeria's skeptics stall polio eradication plan

Prompted by fears that the polio vaccine can cause infertility and AIDS, Nigerian scientists, government officials and religious leaders are traveling to India, South Africa and Indonesia to assess the vaccine's safety.

Despite those concerns, health representatives from Nigeria and five other polio-endemic countries in January maintained that the disease could be eradicated by the World Health Organization (WHO)'s target of 2005 (*Nat. Med.* 9, 1225; 2003). Representatives from Afghanistan, Egypt, India, Niger, Nigeria and Pakistan said multiple door-to-door immunizations of 250 million children this year could send polio to the ranks of smallpox, the only other disease eliminated worldwide, by the year's end.

Egypt and India—which, along with Pakistan, account for more than 95% of the disease cases—could be the first countries in the group to wipe out polio, according to the WHO. The biggest obstacle to the plan comes from Nigeria, where polio is spreading after three predominantly Muslim states in the country's northern region suspended vaccinations in October 2003. The disease has since spread to neighboring countries, according to the WHO. —AS

Europe approves infectious disease center

The European Parliament on 10 February voted to establish a European Center for Disease Prevention and Control in 2005.

The Parliament's decision came earlier than expected because of increasing concerns that Europe needs a monitoring center for contagious diseases, particularly in light of fears about bioterrorism, severe acute respiratory syndrome and avian flu.

The European Commission endorsed the proposal in July 2003 (*Nat. Med.* 9, 1098; 2003). Following the Parliament's decision, the proposal will be sent to the European Council, which could approve the proposal in the upcoming weeks. If approved, the center, to be located in Sweden, will receive a total budget of US\$61 million for its first two years, and will initially employ about 40 people to coordinate disease surveillance among European Union member states. —AS

Clarification: The ethical violations cited in the news article "Halted trial renews questions about cancer vaccines" (*Nat. Med.* 10, 3; 2004) refer specifically to the Zürich center where the trial was held, and not to the other centers in the program.

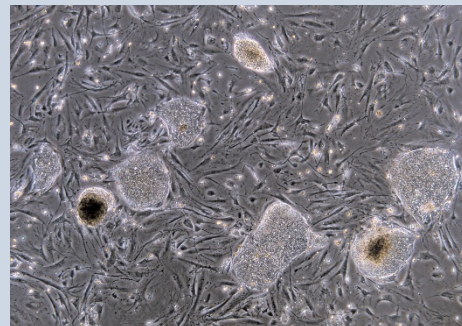
European nations launch stem cell project

Researchers from eight European nations in February launched a joint project that will combine research on human adult stem cells and mouse embryonic, fetal and adult stem cells. The project is geared to promote a European stem cell industry that can compete with those in the US and in Japan.

The European Union will provide \$15 million to the four-year EuroStemCell project, to be coordinated by Edinburgh University's Institute for Stem Cell Research. The project will include researchers from 14 universities, research institutes and biotechnology companies. Researchers plan to develop cell lines derived from stem cells of embryonic, neural, mesodermal and epithelial origin that could have therapeutic potential.

Meanwhile, in Japan, scientists at Kyoto University said in January that they had produced the country's first human embryonic stem cells. The institute, which is publicly funded, has produced three cell lines and is waiting for government approval to distribute the cells.

In California, a group of patient advocates and leading scientists are collecting signatures for a proposition in the November election ballot that, if passed, would provide \$3 billion over 10 years for human embryonic stem cell research. —AS



News briefs written by Aparna Surendran.