

## Major lab finds home in heart of London

In a move that will create one of the biggest biomedical research centers in Europe, the UK's Medical Research Council (MRC) announced in February that the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) will relocate to University College London (UCL).

The decision ends a two-year debate over the fate of NIMR, which is one of the country's largest research institutes. The move was prompted because its current aging buildings on the fringes of London need extensive renovations. But the MRC and its head, Colin Blakemore, have been criticized for their handling of relocation proposals.

King's College London had also put in a bid to house the institute. The MRC said in a statement that the move to UCL should foster the translation of basic research into advances in diagnostics and drugs. Construction of new facilities is expected to begin in 2007 at the earliest.

## Third cancer halts gene therapy trial

Doctors resuspended a French gene therapy trial designed to treat children with an inherited immune disorder in January, after a nine-month-old infant showed signs of cancer.

Children with severe combined immunodeficiency disease (SCID) possess faulty copies of a gene needed to fight infections and must live in a sterile environment. In the gene therapy treatment, a virus inserts a corrective copy of this faulty gene into cells.

The trial was initially halted in 2002, when two children undergoing treatment developed leukemia; one of these children has since died. Scientists think that the virus inserted its genetic material next to a cancer-causing gene in these patients. The French medical regulatory authority AFSSAPS gave permission to restart the study in May 2004 after deciding that the potential benefits outweighed the risks.

The new case is a particular blow for researchers, who had hoped that babies treated after they were six months old would be less vulnerable to cancer. Researchers are now investigating the cause of the latest cancer, in the child who was treated at nine months of age.

## HIV drug program likely to miss 2005 target

A global health effort to treat HIV-infected people with combination antiretroviral treatment is likely to fall well short of its target, according to a progress report released in January by the World Health Organization and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

The 3 by 5 Initiative, which started in 2003, aims to treat three million HIV infected patients in developing countries with antiretroviral therapy by the end of 2005. The report shows that the program has boosted treatment by roughly 75 percent over the last year, bringing the total treated to 700,000.

But that figure represents little over 12 percent of the estimated 5.8 million HIV-positive people in immediate need of the drugs. Activists say that aid organizations will need to dramatically scale up development of health care facilities to reach their initial goal.

Advocates recommend that donor countries boost the amount of aid money, health workers and low-cost medicines they send to needy regions. They also call for debt cancellation for poor countries, which would free up money for HIV treatment.

## French scientists protest at official research plans

Scientists in France are up in arms over new government legislation to reform scientific research. Thousands of researchers stopped work in January in protest.

The official government plan is due out in March, but a draft version circulating among scientists says that \$7.8 billion will be put aside for research over the next three years. French government officials say that research is a priority, and that science and innovation are considered key to the country's economic growth.

French researchers, who have been increasingly vocal about the government's plans for research, say the new legislation will not stop the decline in salaries and number of permanent jobs. They say that the monetary pledge does not come close to the European Union's goal of spending three percent of gross domestic product on science by 2010.

Members of the French National Union of Scientific Researchers (SNCS) have condemned the government for ignoring scientists' own recommendations to improve the research environment, such as by providing more stable jobs for young scientists. An official outline of these proposals was released in early January.

## International child jab campaign gains cash injection

A global vaccine initiative hit the jackpot in January with over \$2.8 billion in donations from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Norwegian and British governments. The money will support the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI), a project that aims to vaccinate the world's poorest children against preventable diseases such as hepatitis B and tetanus.

In January, the Norwegian government and the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation pledged \$290 million and \$750 million respectively to GAVI over the next ten years. The new Gates foundation donation doubles its original \$750 million grant, which jump-started GAVI in 1999.

This donation was eclipsed at the end of January, when the UK government pledged \$1.8 billion over the next 15 years to the fund. Officials hope that the announcement will encourage other rich countries to donate another \$4 billion.

Despite the huge boost, an additional \$8–12 billion is needed to deliver existing vaccines to the millions of children who remain unprotected, according to the World Health Organization. That sum does not cover the cost of developing and administering new vaccines, such as one against the common diarrhea-causing rotavirus.

GAVI has prevented the deaths of an estimated 670,000 children in the last four years. But 2.1 million children died in 2002 because they were not vaccinated.



**In line:** Many children miss out on vaccines for polio, measles, diphtheria and tetanus.

Reuters/Vasily Fedosenko