

## UN panel passes anti-cloning resolution

The United Nations (UN) on 8 March approved a resolution calling for member nations to ban all forms of human cloning. But some countries, including Britain, South Korea and the Netherlands, said they would continue to support research on therapeutic cloning because it could ultimately provide treatments for currently incurable diseases.

The resolution, which is not legally binding, calls on member states “to prohibit all forms of human cloning in as much as they are incompatible with human dignity and the protection of human life.” The UN last year abandoned attempts to draft a legally binding ban.

The US and Costa Rica called the decision, which comes after four years of discord and delay, an ethical victory. But scientific agencies such as the UK Royal Society and the European Society for Human Reproduction & Embryology condemned the resolution, saying it does not distinguish between reproductive cloning, which many groups have already banned, and therapeutic cloning.

## Congo battles outbreak of pneumonic plague

Emergency aid workers are trying to contain an outbreak of the plague in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As of 15 March, 130 suspected cases, including 57 deaths, had been reported.

The outbreak began in late December at a recently reopened diamond mine in the Bas-Uele district in the northern part of the country. The World Health Organization was notified in February and dispatched a team of public health experts to the area. The experts have set up two isolation centers to contain and treat suspected cases and are conducting intensive surveillance activities to trace those who may have been in contact with infected people.

Almost all confirmed cases are of pneumonic plague, an infection that can be controlled with antibiotics but can also be deadly if left untreated. The pneumonic form of plague is the most virulent and least common variant and can be transmitted between people. Two cases were of the septicemic form of plague, but no cases of bubonic plague have yet been reported.

## Obesity researcher admits to faking data

A well-known obesity researcher has admitted to one of the largest cases of scientific fraud in the last 20 years. In a plea agreement announced in March, Eric Poehlman, who held posts at the University of Vermont and the Université de Montréal, agreed to plead guilty to making false claims in a 1999 grant application to the US National Institutes of Health, which brought Poehlman \$542,000 in research funds. According to the Maryland-based Office of Research Integrity, Poehlman submitted 17 other grants with falsified data.

Poehlman will be banned for life from seeking federal funding as part of his plea bargain. The scientist could face up to five years in prison for the fraud, though lawyers involved in the case say he is likely to see little or no jail time. He resigned from the Université de Montréal in January.

The University of Vermont investigated the scientist between 2000 and 2002, after one of his research assistants reported suspicious data analysis in a long-term study of aging. The study was published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 1995, then retracted in 2003 as a result of the investigation. Poehlman is to ask journals to correct or retract ten other papers as part of his plea agreement. The fraudulent research exaggerated the impact of aging and menopause on women's health.

## Skepticism greets FDA's drug safety schemes

A US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory panel voted in late February to allow restricted use of the painkillers Vioxx, Celebrex and Bextra. The drugs should carry stiff warnings, and prescriptions should be limited to those with low risk of cardiovascular disease or those with gastrointestinal problems, the panel said. The European Medicines Agency and Britain's Committee on Safety of Medicines have issued similar warnings on Cox-2 inhibitors.

The FDA plans to establish an independent review board to monitor drug safety. But critics say the move does not go far enough, and say all drug safety operations should be independent from the FDA. Senator Charles Grassley is also preparing legislation to establish an independent drug safety office with the power to order pharmaceutical companies to add warning labels to dangerous medicines.

Drug maker Merck pulled Vioxx from the market in September 2004 after studies showed it increases the risk of heart disease. Public health experts have criticized the FDA's handling of drug safety issues throughout the Vioxx debacle. The most recent criticism focuses on the panel members' ties to the painkillers' manufacturers.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group, said that 10 of the 32 advisors who supported use of the painkillers had consulted for the drugs' manufacturers. Without those votes, Bextra and Vioxx might not have been allowed to remain on the market. But the FDA says these industry ties did not represent a significant conflict of interest in this case.

## Harvard faces Summers of discontent

Harvard University faculty in March gave its president Lawrence Summers a vote of no confidence, an unprecedented event in the famed university's history.

Summers sparked a nationwide firestorm in January when he suggested that intrinsic differences between men and women are responsible for the scarcity of women in science. His remarks fueled an already brewing resentment over his aggressive leadership style (*Nature* **433**, 190–192; 2005). After a series of contentious faculty meetings, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted 218 to 185 to pass the lack-of-confidence motion. None of Harvard's other schools have announced plans for a similar motion.

The vote carries no binding consequences, so Summers' immediate future is unclear. The university's governing board—the only group with the power to fire the president—issued a statement of support for Summers after the vote.

Although some faculty members are calling for his resignation, Summers has given no indication he will resign. Others say that the pervasive lack of confidence will cripple his ability to lead. Several professors questioned his ability to raise funds to support a massive campus expansion project that Summers has spearheaded during his presidency. The former US treasurer became president of Harvard in 2001. Summers' other goals as president include investing more heavily in science and revamping undergraduate education.



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