

## Labs rush to destroy pandemic flu samples

Laboratories in 18 countries have destroyed most of the samples of a 1957 pandemic influenza virus accidentally sent out in a test kit, according to the World Health Organization. As of mid-April, there were no reports of people infected by the samples.

The virus had mistakenly been distributed to thousands of labs around the world beginning in October 2004, but a Canadian laboratory in March identified the sample as the virulent H2N2 strain that killed up to four million people during the 1957–1958 pandemic. As of 20 April, most of the 3,747 labs that received the virus had destroyed the kits.

The samples were meant to be part of a quality-control assessment kit sent by the College of American Pathologists and other organizations. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it is still unclear whether Meridian Biosciences, the Ohio-based company that creates the kits, knew they were distributing a dangerous flu strain. Although risk of accidental infection is low, officials are concerned about a potential epidemic because anyone born after 1968—the year this strain last circulated—lacks immunity to the virus.—ES

## European nations skimp on cancer research

Europe lags far behind the US in cancer funding, says a survey released by the European Commission. Experts say the dearth of support means member states will face problems translating basic research into patient care and may lose cancer researchers to the US.

According to the survey, member states of the European Union spend seven times less per person on cancer research than does the US. Of the 25 current members, the UK spends the most on cancer research—0.0267% of its gross domestic product—followed by Sweden, Germany, France and the Netherlands. The survey also found that European countries spend more of their funds on basic research than on treatment and prevention, while the US prioritizes the latter.

The UK is also focusing on clinical cancer research. In March, the government launched a £2.5 million fund for an integrative training program that encourages doctors to do more academic research.—ES

News briefs written by Emily Singer, K.S. Jayaraman and Helen Pearson

## Marburg ravages Angola

An outbreak of the rare Marburg hemorrhagic fever in Africa has highlighted both difficulties in fighting the killer disease and some puzzling questions about the pathogen.

The current outbreak, originating in Uige province of northern Angola, is the worst recorded. As of 14 April, health authorities had reported 207 deaths and 224 cases.

Researchers are puzzled by some unusual features of the infection. The death rate, at nearly 93%, is higher than that once estimated and a large proportion of those affected have been children under five years of age. Experts speculate that children might have received vaccinations from re-used needles contaminated with the virus, or may have come into contact with bats harboring the virus and living in local caves or trees.

Angolan health authorities and facilities, undermined by years of civil war, have struggled to diagnose and contain the disease. The World Health Organization and other medical groups have sent infectious disease experts and laboratory supplies, including a mobile field laboratory to aid diagnosis and surveillance teams to vet rumored cases. The virus, which causes fever and circulatory collapse, has triggered only a handful of outbreaks since it was first reported in 1967.—HP



Reuters

## India aims to personalize medicine for the world

India's Department of Biotechnology on 2 April announced a scheme geared to position the country as a hub for screening drugs tailored to suit patients' genetic makeup. The plan, part of a new ten-year roadmap for the industry, is based on the premise that India's diverse population makes it the ideal testing ground for personalized medicines.

"Multinational drug companies can customize drugs for the Chinese, the Japanese or the Europeans by generating the clinical data in India because of our genetic diversity," says Samir Bramachari, director of the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology in New Delhi. "Our population is a mix of several races, inbred communities and tribes."

According to the report, released by an eight-member committee, Indian biotech companies should mine India's unique gene pool to identify disease-linked genes and patent any resulting diagnostic and therapeutic products. Drug companies can also carry out clinical studies in India at lower costs. Together with research outsourced to Indian companies, the report says, the strategy could fetch India \$2.5 billion each year by 2010.

The report recommends that the department establish a 'cell' to support research on clinical applications of pharmacogenomics. But details on funding and infrastructure for the project have not yet been released.—KSJ

## Lander leads plan to sequence cancer genome

The US National Cancer Institute is taking the first step in creating the Human Cancer Genome Atlas, a complete catalog of the genetic abnormalities that characterize cancer. Researchers say the project might lead to better prevention and treatment of cancer.

Institute officials are still working out details of the massive project, such as how much money the project will require, who will fund it and which researchers will work on it. They are developing a small-scale version that will lay the groundwork for the much larger atlas.

The endeavor is based on a \$1.35 billion plan by Eric Lander, head of the Broad Institute, who has proposed sequencing DNA from thousands of tumors in the 50 most common types of cancer. The project would require a grander scale of sequencing than the Human Genome Project, but experts say advances in sequencing technologies make it feasible.

Applying genomic information to cancer treatment has already had some success. Last year, scientists discovered that the cancer drug Iressa is most effective in people with a specific mutation. Scientists hope to design similarly targeted drugs to treat the myriad subtypes of cancer.—ES