

US proves unpopular at global AIDS summit

For the few US government researchers who gathered in Bangkok for the XV International AIDS Conference, the meeting cannot have been a pleasant experience.

US AIDS coordinator Randall Tobias was often missing from sessions where he was scheduled to speak. But wherever he or other government representatives appeared, activists shouted them down with chants of “Shame, shame!”, “Liar” and anti-Bush sentiments.

Throughout the conference, activists, scientists and policymakers—including UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and French president Jacques Chirac—took aim at the Bush government for not contributing its “fair share” of funds toward the fight against AIDS. President Bush’s AIDS plan calls for \$15 billion over five years, but the plan earmarks a third of the funds for abstinence-only programs and prohibits use of the money to buy generic antiretroviral drugs.

Protesters also carried in mock corpses during a speech by Pfizer CEO Hank McKinnell and splashed red paint on posters of the G-8 leaders. —AM



STR/AFP/Getty Images

Elsevier under fire for publishing decision

Scientists have boycotted Elsevier’s decision to block publication of a study reporting a high incidence of cancer death among workers in IBM chip-manufacturing plants.

The paper was submitted by epidemiologists Richard Clapp and Rebecca Johnson to a special issue of the journal *Clinics in Occupational and Environmental Medicine* dedicated to health in the semiconductor industry, to be published in November. Under the rallying cry of the issue’s guest editor Joseph LaDou, all of the authors slated to publish their work in the issue have withdrawn their submissions.

The data from the study were submitted by plaintiffs in a lawsuit brought against IBM last year but were deemed inadmissible by the case’s presiding judge (*Nat. Med.* 9, 1443; 2003). The plaintiffs lost the case in February. IBM’s lawyers warned Clapp that publishing the study would violate a confidentiality agreement, but Clapp’s attorney has said that the data are public information (*Nature* 429, 687; 2004). LaDou has accused Elsevier of bowing to pressure from IBM. Elsevier has denied the charge, saying the journal accepts only review articles and not original research.

More than 200 former IBM employees have filed suit against the company over exposure to toxic chemicals on the job. IBM announced in June that more than 50 such lawsuits had been settled and dismissed. —AK

NIH to tighten conflict-of-interest rules

A congressional investigation has revealed that researchers at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) may have violated federal rules by not reporting lucrative outside consultancies.

The panel asked 20 drug companies to list payments made to NIH scientists, and found that, of the 264 deals reported, the NIH had no record of 100. The investigators also said that at least two scientists may have inaccurately represented their consulting arrangements in a previous congressional hearing.

NIH director Elias Zerhouni conceded that the institute had been lax in monitoring financial conflicts of interest and promised to investigate the charges. He also proposed “drastic changes” in ethics regulations—many of them more stringent than those recommended by an outside panel in April (*Nat. Med.* 10, 559; 2004). The rules, which may require new legislation, include capping consulting time at 400 hours per year and limiting compensation to 25% of a researcher’s base salary. Ownership of company stock would be tightly restricted and NIH employees involved in funding decisions would be barred from consulting altogether.

Although such strict limits on outside consulting may drive some researchers to the private sector, they are needed to restore confidence in the institute, Zerhouni said. Meanwhile, the US Food and Drug Administration increased scrutiny over employees’ “outside activities” as the congressional panel broadened its ethics probe beyond the NIH to include 15 federal agencies. —AK

Estrogen replacement linked to dementia

Estrogen might increase the risk of Alzheimer disease and dementia in women aged 65 and older, according to results of a long-term trial funded by the US National Institutes of Health.

The study, called the Women’s Health Initiative Memory Study, supports earlier findings that combined estrogen and progesterone therapy doubles women’s risk of dementia (*Nat. Med.* 10, 8; 2004). Most women who take hormone replacements are under 65, and researchers note that the cognitive effects of estrogen on younger women are unknown. However, the results, based on data from nearly 3,000 women, provide further evidence against the use of postmenopausal hormone therapy to protect against age-related conditions.

Both the combined hormone and estrogen-alone arms of the WHI trial were terminated early, after preliminary data suggested that hormone therapy may raise the risk of stroke, some cancers, and heart disease (*Nat. Med.* 10, 323; 2004). A separate study recently reported that in women over 55 with diabetes or abnormal glucose tolerance, a combination of estrogen and progesterone raises the risk of developing heart disease. —AK

UK amends tissue bill

Responding to loud protests from the scientific community, the British government has amended its proposed Human Tissue Bill, which requires researchers to seek consent from patients who donate samples—including blood—for medical research. But some scientists say the bill is in need of further changes.

Researchers from various organizations, including the Wellcome Trust and the Medical Research Council, objected to the bill’s initial wording, saying it was too restrictive and would hinder important research (*Nat. Med.* 10, 218; 2004). The amendment allows researchers to use tissue samples from living donors without consent for research approved by an ethics committee—provided the samples carry no identifying information about the patient.

The changes to the bill are an improvement, but the requirement for anonymity “could have a detrimental effect on medical research,” the Medical Research Council said in its statement. For some projects—such as one linking antibiotic resistance to prescribing practice—the ability to track samples back to the donors is crucial, the council said. —AM

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