

Britain issues first therapeutic cloning license

UK researchers applauded the country's decision to grant its first license for therapeutic cloning experiments, saying it will help develop stem cell-based therapies.

The country's Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority on 12 August approved Newcastle University researchers' application to create embryonic stem cells. Although their research is still a long way from the clinic, the team aims to make insulin-producing cells that could be transplanted into diabetic patients without risk of immune rejection.

UK law prohibits reproductive cloning but allows therapeutic cloning under heavy review. The permit is a first for the UK and Europe, although the research is allowed in other European countries. In February, South Korean researchers reported that they had cloned the first human embryos.

The announcement also establishes the country's position on cloning two months before UN member states are scheduled to meet to develop an international agreement on the issue. The UK and other countries are advocating for a decision to ban reproductive cloning but allow individual countries to define their own policies on therapeutic cloning.

US to speed up cancer drug approval

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is set to create a new office to oversee approval of cancer-related drugs.

The Office of Oncology Drug Products will combine three areas in the agency to establish more consistent policies for reviewing drugs and some medical imaging compounds, but not cancer vaccines. The new office will also coordinate efforts with other FDA centers as well as with the National Cancer Institute and professional societies.

The initiative aims to lower the cost for developing cancer drugs and speed their passage from lab to clinic. A recent FDA report blamed the widening disconnect between basic and applied drug research for the soaring development costs and high failure rate of drugs, saying it leads to mistakes in judging safety and effectiveness.

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UK set to boost research spending

The UK government is increasing support for science and medicine, both within the country and abroad.

On 12 July, UK finance minister Gordon Brown unveiled a ten-year plan to raise government spending on research and development over the next decade from 1.9% to 2.5% of the country's gross domestic product—effectively adding by 2008 £1 billion to the country's science coffers. The Wellcome Trust charity for biomedical research has pledged to match the funds with £1.5 billion over the next five years.

The money will bolster basic research infrastructure by increasing funding for the research councils, the Office of Science and Technology and university science departments. It will also support knowledge transfer initiatives from the academic sector to industry, a major focus of the new plan. The research community has lauded the announcement, but some have expressed concern over how the funding goal will be met.

Prime Minister Tony Blair announced on 20 July that the UK would also double the country's contribution to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and commit £1.5 billion over the next three years to combat the global AIDS crisis.

WHO pulls Indian generics off AIDS drugs list

The World Health Organization (WHO) has removed three generic AIDS drugs made by the Indian manufacturer Ranbaxy from its list of safe medicines.

In May, the agency delisted two drugs made by another Indian company, Cipla, shortly after the European Union called for routine inspections of quality-control laboratories. In both cases, inspectors found that operations at the laboratories were substandard and the drugs could not be proven to be therapeutically identical to the patented originals.

Ranbaxy has said it is now testing the drugs at a different laboratory, and will resubmit quality data to the WHO. The company also announced on 2 August that it will seek approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for its combination antiretrovirals by the end of the year. Ranbaxy would be the first to participate in an FDA initiative announced in May, inviting overseas generics companies to file for agency approval on a 'fast-track' status.

The US does not recognize the WHO's drug assessment system and has questioned the quality of generic HIV drugs. But experts have criticized the US policy, saying it caters to pharmaceutical company interests and elevates drug prices beyond the reach of most developing countries.

Francis Crick, 88, discoverer of DNA's secrets

Francis Crick, who in 1953 burst into a Cambridge pub and announced that he had found the secret of life, died on 28 July of colon cancer.

The secret, of course, was the double helical structure of DNA, and its discovery earned Crick the Nobel Prize, which he shared in 1962 with James Watson and Maurice Wilkins. But the accomplishment was just the start of a brilliant and varied career. Over the next 25 years, Crick's contributions to molecular biology, including the discovery of DNA transcription and amino acid coding, laid the foundation for understanding the genetics of inheritance.

In 1977, Crick left Cambridge for the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego, where he turned to his other intellectual passion, the study of the human brain. His work there gave credence to a then-radical theory—that consciousness is generated by the firing of neurons.

A true theoretician and visionary, Crick was heralded by colleagues for his intellectual rigor and fearlessness in the face of controversial ideas. As he once said, "a man who is right every time is not likely to do very much."

