

US set to fight fat

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in late August announced a comprehensive research plan to fight obesity.

A year-long task force led by NIH scientists and advised by outside obesity experts identified four areas of study: lifestyle modification, medical treatments, the link between obesity and related conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, and interdisciplinary topics such as intervention aimed at children.

The same week, a 13-member panel of clinicians and researchers in nutrition, epidemiology and public health announced recommendations for the US government's nutritional guidelines. The committee's report did not directly recommend eating less sugar, but alluded to risks of sugar consumption.

Despite recent reports linking sugary beverages to obesity and type 2 diabetes (*JAMA* 292, 927; 2004; *Obes. Res.* 12, 778; 2004), industry groups dismiss the evidence, instead emphasizing consumers' responsibility in maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle. Researchers and advocacy groups have criticized the government, saying its indulgence of trade interests undermines efforts to combat the country's bulging waistlines.

A worldwide antiobesity initiative launched in May by the World Health Organization identified sugar, salt and fats as contributors to obesity despite strong pressure from the US and from international sugar manufacturers.

Big push for US nanotech cancer plan

The US National Cancer Institute (NCI) on 13 September announced a five-year \$144.5 million plan to translate nanotechnology-based cancer research into clinical advances.

The NCI will create a cross-disciplinary alliance of researchers, clinicians and private and public organizations to drive research in six different program areas, including molecular and *in vivo* imaging, drug delivery techniques and sensing devices that determine whether a treatment is working.

The money will be used to train researchers and clinicians, fund research projects and form at least five new centers of excellence. During the first three years, the plan will fund projects closest to clinical application, after which it will focus on longer-term research.

Several nanotechnologies have shown potential in fighting cancer, but some experts warn of health risks that could be associated with nanoparticles.

News Briefs written by Alla Katsnelson

Flu pandemic plan unveiled

The US government has devised a long-awaited plan to combat a potential influenza pandemic. But some key elements, such as how much vaccine and antiviral medicine to stockpile and how to prioritize who should receive it, are pending.

Experts warn that flu viruses—such as the H5N1 strain of avian influenza—could mutate and trigger a pandemic. H5N1 rarely passes from birds to humans but has killed more than two dozen people this year. Reports that pigs in China last year became infected with H5N1 have sparked fears that the animals could serve as 'mixing bowls' in which the viruses could acquire the ability to transmit between people (*Nature* 430, 955; 2004).

A pandemic would require quickly boosting vaccine production, but the US receives its flu vaccine from only two companies. Chiron Corporation, which is slated to produce half of the 100 million flu vaccine doses required by the US for the coming year, announced in late August that it would delay shipment by one month because some doses had been contaminated.

Officials have instead stockpiled 1 million doses of the antiviral medicine Tamiflu, to be used as a front line of defense while enough vaccines are made. But a recent study found that 18% of children treated with Tamiflu quickly produced drug-resistant strains of the virus (*Lancet* 364, 759; 2004).



Bird flu has claimed 29 lives this year.

Hoang Ding Nam

Cloning claims kill article

A fertility journal has revoked plans to publish a paper by renegade researcher Panayiotis Zavos after he announced on 30 August that he had created cloned embryos from the DNA of dead people.

Zavos is notorious for his cloning claims. In January, he announced that he had implanted a cloned embryo into a woman (*Nature* 427, 278; 2004), but retracted the statement after scientists demanded proof. This time, Zavos told a press conference that his research—which involved injecting DNA from deceased donors into cow eggs—had been accepted for publication. Zavos also accepted money for the experiments from the donors' families.

The editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics* then announced he would not print the paper because Zavos had publicly released the data before publication. He also said that the report had not mentioned that the donor cells came from deceased individuals.

Meanwhile, on 2 September Singapore passed legislation that bans reproductive cloning but allows embryonic stem cell research. The US continues to support an international ban on both therapeutic and reproductive cloning. A United Nations meeting to decide a worldwide cloning policy has been scheduled for October.

Genes may be key to autism

Autism can be traced to the interplay of two or more genes, including the so-called Angelman gene, with the environment, reports a new *American Journal of Medical Genetics* study that fuels the ongoing debate about the origins of the disease.

There is some basis to believe genetics has a role in autism. For instance, there is a 90% chance that the identical twin of an autistic person will also develop the disorder. But because autism is likely to be a complex disorder with multiple components, there has been little progress in determining its cause.

Meanwhile, the debate over whether vaccines containing thimerosal can trigger autism continues, despite an Institute of Medicine report in May rejecting the link.

Columbia University researchers announced in June that the preservative can cause autism-like behavior in some strains of mice (*Mol. Psychiatry*, 9, 833–845; 2004). But an epidemiological study of more than 1,000 autistic children found no link between vaccination and the disorder (*Lancet* 364, 963; 2004).

In the UK, childhood immunization rates for measles, mumps and rubella have fallen from 92% in 1996 to 82% last year.