

ON THE RECORD

“How can we lose... when we have a NASA engineer on our team?”

A contestant on the television show *Survivor Panama* is despondent after former astronaut Dan Barry fails in a team challenge. Barry was later evicted from the show by his team.

“It was the most rewarding poster I’ve ever done.”

Geologist Alison Rust muses on her experiments that compared lava flows to fudge.

Sources: *CollectSpace.com*, *New York Times*

SCORECARD

Genes and architecture
Singapore has hatched a plan to build a major bridge in the shape of the DNA double helix.

Robo shark
US Navy researchers are developing a shark-tracking tag they can implant in the creature’s brain, which might someday control its swimming.

Weather forecasting
There is a new kind of betting on the US national collegiate basketball tournament this month. Correctly predicting the weather on competing campuses on the day of a game could net you a week-long tornado chase.

NUMBER CRUNCH

Ever heard something dodgy on the evening news? A survey of local news broadcasts in 50 US cities backs up the notion that television isn’t always a reliable place to get your health and medical advice.

1,799 health stories were broadcast during 2,795 top-rated news shows during October 2002.

33 seconds was the median length of those segments.

27% included an interview with a health professional.

23 reports described how duct tape could be used to remove warts.

Source: Pribble, J. M. et al. *Am. J. Manag. Care* 12, 170–176 (2006).

Consumer products leap aboard the nano bandwagon

WASHINGTON DC

The number of commercial products advertised as containing nanoparticles is increasing rapidly, according to a new inventory. Environmental groups say the list shows that not enough is being done to oversee nanotech’s spread into the commercial sphere. But others say that marketing, not a rise in use of the technology, may be driving the trend.

The inventory of nanogoods was released on 10 March by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, a think tank based in Washington DC that works on nanotech issues. Cataloguing every nanotech product that exists would be close to impossible — there are no regulations that require companies to register such products. So for a rough estimate of how much nanotech is out there, Andrew Maynard and his colleagues at the centre scanned the web for products that openly advertise the use of nanotechnology.

Maynard and his co-workers found 212 products that use nanotechnology. This is double the number found by a similar survey carried out last year by EmTech Research, a pro-industry research group based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Nearly half of these products were creams, cosmetics and supplements, designed to be applied to the skin or taken orally.

That is evidence of the industry’s growing commercial success, says Francine Porter, president of Denver-based Osmotics Cosmeceuticals. Her company markets an anti-cellulite cream called Lipoduction, describing “Nano Technology that increases delivery up to 700% over traditional cellulite products.” Porter says sales have been brisk. “This industry is just exploding with nanotechnology,” she says.

Environmental campaigners, who have long voiced fears about the health and environmental implications of nanotechnology, say the figures highlight a worrying lack of regulation. “If the numbers are to be trusted, it says to me that potential exposure to nanomaterials would appear to be growing quicker than expected,” says Douglas Parr, a physical chemist and chief

IMAGE
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REASONS

Small wonder: advertising the use of nanotech may hook buyers.

scientist for Greenpeace UK in London.

But others say much of the apparent surge in the use of nanotechnology may be the result of companies relabelling their goods to meet consumer preferences. For example, most cosmetic creams already contain nanoscale particles to penetrate the skin, so companies could use this in their marketing. “Non-scientists tend to think there is something magic about nano,” says Jöns Hilborn, a chemist at Uppsala University in Sweden and former president of the European Tissue Engineering Society.

Scientists have already learned to use this relabelling trick to win funding from politicians, says Hilborn. A project he heads, to develop miniature scaffolds for tissue engineering, recently won €1.7 million from the European Union’s Framework programme, following a call for nanobiotechnology projects. “I could have very well written the proposal without nano in there,” he says. “I didn’t lie to get the money; I just used the word they like to hear.”

Paul Ferron, who heads Beyond Skin Science — a California-based company that sells a line of nanotechnology-based products — agrees that despite the concerns of campaigners, the term ‘nano’ is increasingly becoming a selling point for consumers as well as funding agencies. Products such as Apple’s iPod nano music player have boosted recognition of the word, he says. “I see it more and more, I hear it more and more.” ■

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