

► surrounding an Earth-sized planet is beyond the reach of even the 6.5-metre James Webb Space Telescope, the orbital observatory that NASA hopes to launch by 2018 if it does not fall victim to cost overruns. “James Webb, yea or nay, is not the answer to our prayers,” Marcy says.

As a result, researchers such as Marcy and Traub stress the need to go beyond the indirect techniques of HARPS and Kepler, and gather the faint light from the planet itself, which is normally invisible in the glare of the parent star. For that, astronomers need either a giant space telescope equipped with a device for blocking starlight, or an interferometer, consisting of several telescopes flying in formation. NASA did develop a proposal for such a space telescope, called Terrestrial Planet Finder, and the European Space Agency hoped to fly a similar mission called Darwin. But budgetary constraints have left both missions in limbo, unlikely to advance to the front of either agency’s queue until well into the next decade. At the conference, Traub raised the issue. “People are not thinking deeply about the distant future. People are wrapped up with what they’re doing right now,” he says. “Clearly, I’m concerned.”

But Laughlin isn’t as worried. He says that the enthusiasm and momentum in planet-hunting may lead to an unexpected solution. “People have a history of being inventive when they need to be,” he says. He points to French philosopher Auguste Comte, who in 1835 wrote that astronomers might be able to learn about the shapes, sizes and motions of stars, but that stellar densities, temperatures and chemical compositions would be “forever denied to us”.

Within three decades, astronomical spectroscopy was starting to answer all of those questions. ■

## MISCONDUCT

# Austria reinstates disgraced doctor

*Physician at heart of retracted clinical trial can return to work.*

BY ALISON ABBOTT

He carried out clinical trials without ethical approval. He failed to provide raw data for his high-profile publications. He falsified legal documents. But despite this record, an employment commission has ordered that Austrian urologist Hannes Strasser be readmitted to his teaching post at the Medical University of Innsbruck.

Now the university is trying to find a way out of the embarrassing situation — one that highlights the weakness and tardiness of Austria’s system for dealing with research misconduct. “We are being forced by a legal decision to let him back when we think he has no place here,” says the university’s rector, Herbert Lochs.

The university suspended Strasser three years ago after serious concerns were first raised about his trial of a novel stem-cell therapy for urinary incontinence. The therapy relied on injecting stem cells and fibroblasts derived from the patients’ own tissue into the urinary sphincter; it had been developed by Innovacell Biotechnologie in Innsbruck, a company co-founded by Strasser, and with which he is no longer involved. But many patients reported no improvement after the therapy, and others claim that it caused their bladders to seal over.

A subsequent investigation by the Austrian government’s Agency for Health and Food Safety (AGES) found a series of ethical and legal misdemeanours, which led them to conclude that the trial was illegal and invalid (see *Nature* **454**, 922–923; 2008). *The Lancet* withdrew Strasser’s paper reporting the trial’s results (S. Kleinert and R. Horton *Lancet* **372**, 789–790; 2008).

But on 8 September the Vienna-based National Disciplinary Committee — which adjudicates on employment issues relating to civil servants (including university professors) — revoked Strasser’s suspension. The committee based its decision on the outcome of a case brought to an Innsbruck court in which the university hospital sued Strasser and his department head Georg Bartsch for €1.2 million (US\$1.6 million) — its estimated cost for giving Strasser’s treatment to 400 patients not involved in clinical trials. The court refused the claim on 3 August, stating that there was no proof that Strasser had intended financial deception. Bartsch was too ill to stand trial.

However, the court also stated that Strasser had provided false testimony during a 2008 civil damages case brought by a patient who had received the treatment, and that he had falsified evidence in the AGES investigation, which considered legal issues surrounding the clinical trials. It fined him €4,500.

The university plans to appeal against Strasser’s reinstatement. In the meantime, the university has asked Strasser only to prepare unscheduled lectures: “We don’t want him to get into clinical work,” says Lochs.

In separate legal cases, several patients who say the treatment harmed them are now trying to bring charges of grievous bodily harm against Strasser, according to the Innsbruck-based lawyer Thomas Juen, who has previously represented trial patients seeking damages.

Earlier this year, the Medical University of Innsbruck completed its own investigation into the scientific aspects of the case, finding that Bartsch and Strasser had engaged in what Lochs views as “massive scientific misconduct”.

The university’s slowness in carrying out the investigation has been widely criticized. One academic, who asked to remain anonymous, said he believed that a timely, formal statement that Strasser had perpetrated serious scientific misconduct might have helped avert the disciplinary committee’s revocation of his dismissal. Juen adds that he is surprised that the disciplinary committee revoked Strasser’s suspension so quickly, “given that appeals are ongoing, and that looming cases of grievous bodily harm on the part of patients have not yet come to court”.

Strasser did not respond to *Nature*’s request for an interview, and Bartsch was unavailable for comment as a result of his illness. Strasser, however, was quoted in a local newspaper as saying that he wants to return to clinical practice and that the hospital administration may not be able to stop him. ■

## CORRECTION

The News story ‘Canadian ozone network faces axe’ (*Nature* **477**, 257–258; 2011) stated that Environment Canada planned to cut 776 jobs. Although 776 employees will be affected by workforce changes, only about 300 posts are being eliminated.

SOURCE: NASA KEPLER TEAM

## SIZING UP THE SAMPLE

Since February, the Kepler team has increased its catalogue of candidate planets by 45%. In that time, the number of Earth-sized candidates has nearly doubled, from 68 to 123.

