

Early end to tamoxifen cancer trial leaves questions unanswered

[LONDON] British scientists expressed fears last week that the suspension of a US trial of the anti-breast cancer drug tamoxifen could wreck their own parallel seven-country trial. The US National Cancer Institute (NCI) halted its six-year trial of 13,000 women when researchers reported 85 cancers among patients taking tamoxifen, compared with 154 among those on a placebo.

The trial had 14 months left to run. British scientists fear that the parallel International Breast Cancer Intervention Study (IBIS) may collapse if its 7,000 participants on placebos insist on being given tamoxifen. One IBIS scientist says that, although interim findings show that tamoxifen appears to reduce the incidence of breast cancer, researchers may never know whether the drug can prevent the disease in the longer term. "We will not know how many of them will develop cancer in the years to come," he says. "My feeling is that, if we stop trials prematurely, we will not get the full answer." The NCI came under fire for announcing the findings through a press release, instead of publishing results in a peer-reviewed journal.

Search for top 50 young biotech groups

[MUNICH] Fifty new biotechnology research groups, each headed by a talented young researcher, are to be set up in Germany next year. Projects will be chosen through a competition called BioFuture which was launched last week by Jürgen Rüttgers, the federal research minister.

An autonomous panel of experts will select the first projects this summer, but young scientists have until January 1999 to apply for the competition. The groups will be small, typically comprising a team leader plus two postdoctoral and two PhD students, and will be hosted by either a university or a research institute. Funding will be limited to five years, and will come from the research ministry's biotechnology budget.

Scripps and Novartis in genomics link-up

[LONDON] The Swiss-based life sciences company Novartis is to set up one of the world's largest research institutes devoted to functional genomics. The Novartis Institute for Functional Genomics, to be sited adjacent to Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California, will receive \$250 million from the company over the next ten years.

Functional genomics involves clarifying the relationship between a particular

genotype and a disease state. Danil Vasella, the president of Novartis, said last week that the company's partnership with Scripps and other academic researchers through the institute "will give us the ability to work simultaneously on a large number of known genetic links, thereby accelerating the pace of our discovery efforts".

France and Britain ratify nuclear test ban

[LONDON] The United Kingdom and France last week became the first declared nuclear weapons states to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, bringing the total number of ratifications to 13. The treaty has been signed by 149 states since opening for signature in September 1996. It will become effective when ratified by all 44 named states with civilian nuclear capabilities — so far only six have done so.

Three of these named states, India, North Korea and Pakistan, have not even signed the treaty. But its nuclear test verification system is likely to be complete before the treaty enters into force. More than 300 worldwide monitoring stations will be able to detect an air, sea or land-based nuclear explosion with a yield of more than one kiloton.

Mapping out the path to biodiversity

[LONDON] A group of the world's leading biodiversity scientists, meeting in Mexico last week, have issued recommendations on research needed to implement key articles of the UN biodiversity convention. These include promoting links between scientific institutions involved in cataloguing the world's species, and developing a system of naming species that can be applied in countries with few taxonomists.

Chaired by Ghilleen Prance, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London, the group also recommended research on the interactions between species, and on the impact of human activities on species diversity. The group met under the aegis of Diversitas, a network of scientists, sponsored by six international scientific organizations, that has been given the job of improving links between scientists and the biodiversity convention.

Mathematics to aid biologists at Princeton

[WASHINGTON] The Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton is to set up a research initiative in theoretical biology, to begin this autumn. The initiative will focus on using mathematics to analyse biological processes, including infectious agents such as HIV, and prions, as well as the use of mathematics to provide insights into evolutionary biology.

The programme will be headed by Martin Nowak, currently professor of mathematical biology at the University of Oxford. Nowak says that the use of mathematics in biosciences is increasing, and that the Princeton initiative provides a "chance to introduce bright young physicists and mathematicians to a scientific field which is full of open questions and unexplored areas".

Russian scientists still waiting for pay day

[MOSCOW] Scientists working for the Russian Academy of Sciences last week picketed the offices of Russia's central bank and the Ministry of Finance, demanding payment of their salaries for February and March. The government had transferred the funds to the Moscow National Bank, but the bank was declared insolvent last month, and all accounts have been frozen.

Vladimir Zaitsev, an official from the federal treasury department, has promised to transfer funds to another bank, Rossiyskiy Credit. He says that the scientists should receive the money before the end of April, and that Tatyana Nesterenko, head of the federal treasury, has agreed to pay the scientists immediately.

Steady as she goes for Japan's fusion device



[TOKYO] Scientists at Japan's National Institute of Fusion Sciences witnessed the successful first operation of the world's largest stellarator fusion device last week. The Large Helical Device (LHD), which is designed to explore new aspects of steady-state plasma physics, produced the first plasma (pictured) at 1.5 tesla, which is less than half its maximum magnetic energy. The institute aims to bring the reactor up to its maximum capacity over the next six months.

The reactor cost ¥50 billion (US\$373 million) and took eight years to build. Funded by the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, it is a key element of Japan's fusion research programme. Support for other components of this programme, such as the JT-60 tokamak and Japan's contribution to the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, comes from the Science and Technology Agency.