

British politicians press case for Human Genetics Commission

London. A British parliamentary committee has reiterated a suggestion first made last year that the government should set up a broad-ranging Human Genetics Commission to deal with the inter-relationship between many different aspects of genetic science. It says that it is confident that this suggestion — initially rebuffed by Whitehall — will now be accepted.

The proposal was made by the House of Commons select committee on science and technology, following a lengthy inquiry into the field (see *Nature* 376, 202; 1995). In its response to the committee's conclusions last year, the government rejected the idea of a new body as unnecessary, in the light of existing specialist advisory committees. But in a highly unusual move, the committee organized a follow-up series of hearings to restate its case.

During these hearings, government ministers indicated that they were prepared to reconsider their earlier reaction (see *Nature* 380, 6; 1996), and in a report on the hearings published last week, the all-party committee says it now expects some form of body to be set up by the government. The main aim of the body would be "to foster public confidence and understanding" of genetics. But it adds that "in practical terms the commission's function would be to advise the government on the broad issues raised by genetic science." □

Genetic data ban for US insurers

Washington. The US Senate last week unanimously passed a health reform bill that explicitly bars insurers from using 'genetic information' to deny coverage to applicants. The bill's House of Representatives counterpart, passed on 28 March, also includes such information among factors that insurers may not use to deny coverage, making it highly likely that both bodies will agree to this measure in any joint legislation. The main goal of the Senate bill, whose authors are Nancy Kassebaum (Republican, Kansas) and Edward Kennedy (Democrat, Massachusetts), is to prevent people from losing health insurance when they change or leave jobs.

Kassebaum initially resisted modifying the bill to include 'genetic information' among the factors insurers may not use to turn potential clients away (see *Nature* 380, 91; 1996). But at the urging of scientists and patient and other advocacy groups, she inserted the two words in the bill before it came to a vote on 23 April. □

Solar telescope performs to plan

Paris. The Franco-Italian telescope Thémis — Télescope Héliographique pour l'Etude du Magnétisme et des Instabilités Solaires — which will be officially inaugurated in June, has reached its planned performance levels, according to results of the first spectra obtained using the telescope. Two-thirds of its cost of FF87 million (US\$11 million) have been met by France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and the rest from its Italian counterpart, the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche. Providing information on the solar wind and solar turbulence, the telescope will complement studies of the solar corona by the SOHO satellite launched last December by the European Space Agency and NASA (see page 9). □

University cuts 'harming health'

London. Budget cuts to universities that train Britain's doctors will have an adverse effect on the National Health Service, according to the UK Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP), the heads of the universities. At a press conference in London last week, the CVCP said that the 31 per cent reduction in universities' capital income announced in the last budget would damage medical research and potentially imperil the lives and health of patients.

The budget cuts have already delayed a new institute of health sciences in Oxford, according to the CVCP. Similarly, the Institute of

Psychiatry at the University of London is unable to fund a new building to house the Social, Genetic and Development Psychiatry Research Centre. The government has increased the annual intake of medical students by 500 to 5,000 in order to meet a predicted shortfall in doctors. But Sir Michael Thompson, chair of the CVCP's medical committee, said there was no sign of the extra money needed to teach these students. □

'Racist' psychologist in book row

London. A psychology lecturer at Edinburgh University is demanding \$75,000 after publisher John Wiley & Sons Ltd withdrew his book from publication. The move by Wiley & Sons follows reports in the British press that Christopher Brand, author of the book concerned — *The g factor: general intelligence and its implications* — described himself as a "scientific racist". Brand says Wiley has offered to release to him unjacketed copies and reassign copyright. □

East-West projects earmarked

Moscow. A joint committee set up by the European-funded International Association for Promotion of Co-operation with Scientists from the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union (INTAS) and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), meeting in Moscow, has identified 145 projects to receive overall financial support of 6.6 million ECU (US\$ 8.1million).

The average funding of each project will be about 50,000 ECU over two years. A total of 1,353 proposals received up to the middle of last December were subject to peer review in a first round of evaluation. Each project involves at least four scientific teams, two from Russian scientific institutions and two from different INTAS Member States. At least 80 per cent of the funds are allocated to the Russian research teams. The results of the joint evaluation will now be submitted to the respective decision-making bodies of both INTAS and the RFBR. □

Canada plans single blood agency

Ottawa. Apparently yielding to public concern stirred up by controversy over how decisions over HIV-tainted blood were made in the mid-1980s, federal and provincial health ministers have agreed to reorganize Canada's blood system under a single new agency. David Dingwall, the federal health minister, says there is a consensus among the ministers that an agency is needed that is independent from political considerations and with clear overall authority. A decision on the agency's final shape will be made by September. □

Live surgery on the Internet

London. A surgical operation has been broadcast live on the Internet for the first time. Transmitted to an estimated 60,000 users through the Health Online Service, the operation at the German Cancer Research Centre in Heidelberg involved two techniques to replace cruciate ligaments. Images were displayed alongside commentary from one of the surgeons, and viewers were able to send questions via e-mail. □

Joint research in South China Sea

Melbourne. The Philippines and Vietnam are to send their first-ever joint marine research team to the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. The 15 Filipino and 12 Vietnamese scientists say that they will compile an inventory of marine organisms during the 15-day trip aboard a Philippine government boat.

The territorial waters of the Spratlys are believed to include large deposits of oil and gas. The six countries that claim sovereignty over the islands — Taiwan, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines — have agreed to conduct joint research as a means of reducing military tension, and a first step towards greater multilateral cooperation. □