

US to consider routine HIV tests

In an effort to boost the number of people tested for HIV, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) plans to recommend that voluntary HIV testing become a part of routine medical care for individuals between the ages of 13 and 64. Repeat tests would be recommended for those at high risk.

The CDC estimates that about 250,000 people do not know they are HIV positive, and account for most new HIV infections each year.

The proposed guidelines, which are expected to be published late this summer, would eliminate pretest counseling and the need for a separate consent form. Current guidelines call for routine testing only of pregnant women and people involved in high-risk sexual activities or needle-sharing.

AIDS advocacy groups have raised concerns that the proposal could lead to coercion, invasion of privacy and testing without informed consent. The CDC's recommendations also contradict findings published in July 2005 by the US Preventive Services Task Force—an independent panel of experts in primary care and prevention—that there is inadequate evidence to recommend for or against routine HIV testing.—AO

South Korea's Hwang indicted for fraud

South Korean prosecutors in May indicted disgraced cloning researcher Woo-Suk Hwang on charges of fraud, embezzlement and breach of bioethics law.

The Seoul Central District prosecutor's office charged Hwang with committing fraud by obtaining research funds based on deliberately falsified data, embezzling KRW2.8 billion (US\$3 million) in state funds and private donations for his research, and violating bioethics law by purchasing human eggs for research. The charges are the culmination of a five-month investigation. The office also charged five junior scientists on Hwang's team with various offenses.

Though discredited, Hwang still has supporters. Four days before the indictment, South Korean Buddhists offered Hwang \$65 million to resume his research. Hwang, who has been in seclusion for most of the last five months—in a monastery, according to some accounts—did not comment on the charges or funds.—AO

California stem cell scheme declared legal

California's \$3 billion stem cell initiative drew a step closer to viability on 21 April, when a state judge dismissed two challenges to its constitutionality, filed by right-to-life and taxpayer citizens' groups.

But the San Francisco-based California Institute for Regenerative Medicine still won't be able to raise money through the sale of bonds while Judge Bonnie Lewman Sabraw's ruling goes through appeals, a process expected to last at least into 2007 while the case works its way to the state Supreme Court.

The stem cell institute, created when 59% of the state's voters approved a ballot measure in 2004, could continue to borrow from investors willing to risk nonpayment of the loans if the courts ultimately quash the program. The institute in April awarded its first grants after raising \$14 million in contributions and loans.

Judge Sabraw ruled that the institute's structure was in keeping with its mandate to aid the development of therapies and diagnostics while helping to stimulate the state's economy. Sabraw rejected plaintiffs' claims that the institute could skirt state governmental oversight, and that its managers have conflicts of interest because they also represent research centers that might apply for funding.—BD

Australia set to boost biomedical research

Medical research is a winner in this year's Australian budget, announced on 9 May, with a boost of AUS\$500 million over four years for the nation's primary funding agency for biomedical research.

Last year, the government announced that the agency, the National Health and Medical Research Council, would be restructured to be fully independent of the health department (*Nat. Med.* 11, 1131; 2005). Together, the developments are seen as long-overdue improvements for the funding agency, researchers say.

The budget increase is expected to be funded by the government's imminent sale of its private health insurance company. The plan injects AUS\$213 million into new infrastructure for medical research organizations, including the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, a premier biomedical research facility. The budget also includes a new research fellowship scheme of AUS\$170 million over nine years to support up to 60 senior researchers.

Separately, the health minister, Tony Abbott, also announced the creation of a new AUS\$22 million adult stem cell center to be established at Griffith University in Brisbane. Abbott, a devout Catholic, opposes embryonic research, preferring to see resources focused on adult stem cell therapy.—CD

Former FDA chief faces criminal charges

A lawsuit against the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) revealed in April that the former head of the agency, Lester Crawford, is under criminal investigation for financial improprieties and false statements to Congress.

The investigations were disclosed at a hearing over the emergency contraceptive Plan B, a contentious subject during Crawford's tenure. The Center for Reproductive Rights, an advocacy group that brought the lawsuit, had claimed that top FDA officials stalled a decision to allow Plan B to be sold over the counter. The center was scheduled to question Crawford on 27 April.

But the day before the deposition, Crawford's lawyer, Barbara Van Gelder, said she would advise Crawford to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination if ordered to answer questions. She did not discuss the accusations further and the deposition was delayed until late May.

Reports of Crawford's financial ties emerged shortly after his resignation from the FDA in September 2005. Documents released by the government showed that in 2004—while he was an acting commissioner—either Crawford or his wife had sold shares of companies regulated by the agency.—EW



Tough times: Lester Crawford's tenure as FDA chief was short and contentious.

Scott J. Ferrill