

Bush's pick for FDA chief faces disputes

President Bush on 15 March nominated acting chief Andrew von Eschenbach as commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), but disputes in the US Congress over emergency contraceptives may stall his confirmation. The FDA has been without a permanent leader for most of Bush's presidency.

The acting commissioner has served as temporary chief of the FDA since September 2005. During that time, he retained his post as head of the National Cancer Institute (NCI), but now says he intends to resign from that position. The NCI funds research on drugs that the FDA has the power to approve or reject, and his dual role raised questions over potential conflicts of interest.

Democratic senators say they will stall von Eschenbach's confirmation until the FDA makes a decision on the approval of the Plan B emergency contraceptive. Republicans and Democrats are also likely to debate other hot political issues such as drug safety and stem cell research.

Prior to von Eschenbach's reign, Lester Crawford, who survived a tough Senate battle for confirmation, resigned after less than three months at the helm. Crawford had been acting commissioner since the previous permanent chief Mark McClellan left in 2004.

Companies renege on most follow-up studies

Drug companies have conducted fewer than one-third of the follow-up trials they agreed to undertake when their products received marketing approval, officials at the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) said in February.

The postmarketing trials, also called phase 4 trials, test the safety and efficacy of a drug after it enters the market. Pharmaceutical companies sometimes promise to conduct these studies in exchange for speedier review of their products.

But hundreds of studies remain unfinished, the FDA says, with one dating back as far as 1955. Of 1,231 promised trials, drug makers completed 172 follow-up studies, or about 14%. Nearly 65%, or 797, are pending or have not yet begun.

The percentage of unfinished trials has remained fairly constant since the FDA began closely monitoring the issue in 2002. That year, nearly 61% of promised trials were pending.

Embattled Harvard president to step down

After a stormy but brief reign, Larry Summers stepped down in February from his post as president of Harvard University. His resignation, which goes into effect on 30 June, raises questions about the future of science at Harvard and about his successors' ability to govern the university's vocal faculty.

Summers pushed for better science at Harvard, championing stem cell research and supporting a new campus space dedicated to science. But his overbearing personality and a series of offensive missteps, say many faculty, weakened his ability to be an effective leader.

Summers' troubles began only months after he took office in July 2001, when he alienated the popular African-American studies expert Cornel West. Faculty sentiment against Summers hardened after a well-publicized debacle in January 2005, when he suggested at a conference that biological differences between the sexes could explain why so few women become top scientists. Two months later, Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences passed a vote of no confidence in the president.

Following that, faculty, particularly those in the arts and sciences, became openly critical of Summers. His resignation came one week before the department had planned another vote of no confidence.

Global stem cell guidelines proposed

Concerned that conflicting rules on stem cell research worldwide stymie international collaborations, scientists in February proposed a set of global principles to guide the field. Among their suggestions, the panel said that laws should take into account advances in science, and that researchers should be free to do stem cell work abroad that is banned in their own country.

The guidelines would not supersede national or state laws, but could steer the course of regions that lack stem cell policies. The panel, which included more than 50 scientists, ethicists and journal editors from 14 countries, plans to set up a website where researchers can discuss their local laws.

The panel's effort began in 2004, long before the revelation that South Korean stem cell scientists had lied about their results. But the guidelines reflected the concerns raised in the aftermath (*Nat. Med.* 12, 4; 2006).

Of the 15 suggestions, 3 ask journal editors to be more scrupulous in accepting papers on stem cell research. Editors should encourage authors to disclose their exact role in the research, the panel said. They should also require authors to submit data verifying the authenticity of embryonic stem cell lines and a statement of compliance with the local laws.

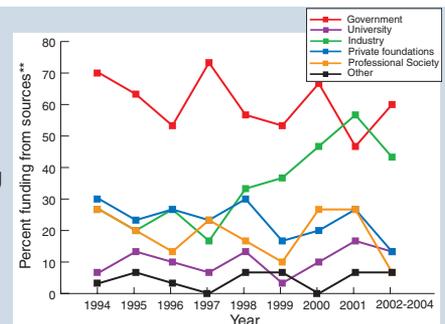
Industry-funded studies see dramatic rise

Private-sector funds are increasingly producing the most influential medical research, according to a study published in March. The findings raise questions about industry's influence over science.

Between 1992 and 2001, about 60% of papers were from studies funded by various government agencies. But the proportion of trials funded by industry during that time increased from less than 20% to 56% in 2001, surpassing funding from all other sources (see figure). Results from randomized, controlled trials—which are often the most influential papers—were funded almost exclusively by companies (*BMJ* published online 17 March 2006; doi:10.1136/bmj.38768.420139.80).

Companies often steer their research toward diseases that generate the highest profits, rather than toward maladies, such as malaria, that disproportionately affect the developing world. Knowing that journals favor papers that are likely to be cited more often, the private sector might be using publications to promote these interests, the authors, researchers from the University of Ioannina in Greece, said.

The researchers examined the 30 most-cited journal articles each year from 1994 to 2004. Because there have been fewer citations for the years 2002 to 2004, they combined data from those years into a single entry. About 43% of papers from 2002 to 2004 were funded, at least in part, by industry.



The proportion of industry-funded studies has more than doubled over the past decade.