

Governments end AIDS placebo trials in developing countries

[WASHINGTON] The United Nations, the US government and France's AIDS agency called a halt last week to the use of placebos in overseas trials seeking to prevent transmission of HIV from pregnant mothers to their infants.

The move follows a statement from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that conclusive interim data from a Thai study showed that a \$50 course of zidovudine (AZT) in late pregnancy cut perinatal HIV transmission by half.

The governments said this conclusion justified the immediate halt of the use of placebos, or their replacement with short-course AZT regimens, in trials in other developing countries.

Until now, they added, placebo use "was the only way in which it could be clearly and quickly established whether a shorter AZT regimen was safe and more effective than no treatment at all" in developing countries.

Critics have attacked the use of placebos because long-course AZT treatment was shown to be effective in 1994, and is widely used in industrialized countries.

"It is inexcusable that they ever did these

experiments in the first place," says Sidney Wolfe of the Washington-based lobby group Public Citizen.

Satellite setback for Japan's space agency

[TOKYO] Japan's space programme received another setback last weekend when its H-II rocket failed to put into orbit one of the world's largest telecommunications satellites. The second burning time of fuel in the rocket's second-stage engine was shorter than anticipated, and the 2.2-tonne, ¥46.2 billion (US\$370 million) Communications and Broadcasting Engineering Test Satellite (COMETS) failed to reach geostationary orbit.

The failure is another blow to Japan's National Space and Development Agency. Last July, its environmental monitoring satellite ADEOS — the Advanced Earth Observation Satellite — ran out of power and stopped working, and budget cuts brought an abrupt end to the agency's plans to develop the unmanned space shuttle HOPE.

US study puts spotlight on radon cancer risk

[WASHINGTON] Indoor radon contributes to about 12 per cent of lung cancer deaths each year in the United States, according to a

report from the National Research Council (NRC). And most of these deaths occur among smokers. "Radon — particularly in combination with smoking — poses an important public health risk, and it should be recognized as such," says Jonathan Samet of the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, who chaired the study.

About one-third of the estimated 15,400 to 21,800 radon-related lung cancer deaths each year could be prevented if radon levels in homes were reduced to the recommended Environmental Protection Agency standard of four picocuries per litre of air. Some six per cent of US homes have levels higher than that, according to the report.

NASA's chief scientist says it's 'time to move on'

[WASHINGTON] The top scientist at the US space agency NASA announced his resignation last week, after five years heading the agency's Office of Space Science. Wesley Huntress, a planetary scientist who began his career at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, expects to depart in the autumn. His successor has yet to be named.

Huntress's tenure has been marked by a shift from large, expensive space science missions to smaller and less expensive ones. Although space science budgets remain tight, they are projected to rise relative to other

sectors of NASA, and several initiatives are planned. With space science in comparatively good shape, wrote Huntress in a letter to colleagues last week, "it is just simply time for me to move on".

Fusion project could go back to drawing-board

[MUNICH] The council of the 'next-step' fusion reactor project, ITER, seems to be conceding for the first time that there is a need to consider alternative reactor designs. The concession follows falling financial and political support for the project (see *Nature* 391, 620; 1998), which is a collaboration between Europe, Japan, the United States and Russia.

At a meeting last week, the council agreed to set up a working group to consider options for restricting the aims of ITER as currently designed, enabling it to be built more cheaply. But the group will also investigate the more radical solution of considering possible alternatives to ITER's tokamak design.

French 'water memory' scientist loses libel case

[PARIS] Jacques Benveniste, the French researcher who claimed in 1988 to have shown that extreme dilutions of antibody

solutions could retain their biological activity, this week lost libel suits against the Nobel prizewinners, Georges Charpak and François Jacob, and Claude Hennis, a researcher at the School of Industrial Physics and Chemistry in Paris.

Benveniste had brought the charges following statements by the scientists in articles in the newspaper *Le Monde* suggesting that his research may have been fraudulent (see *Nature* 389, 427; 1997). The *tribunal de grande instance* of Paris did not rule on the substance of the charges, but threw them out because of a procedural error — that Benveniste should have filed a penal suit and not a civil one.

One result is that Benveniste cannot bring new charges based on the articles. "I find myself in the position where I am unable to defend my honour," he says. He intends to demand that INSERM, the national biomedical agency, should launch an inquiry to clear his name. He has also challenged the scientists to repeat their statements in public.

Senators seek to double NIH budget

[WASHINGTON] Four US senators are calling on the Senate Budget Committee to allocate sufficient funds to double the budget of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) over the coming five years. In a letter to Pete

Domenici (Republican, New Mexico), the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, and Frank Lautenberg (Democrat, New Jersey), the committee's senior Democrat, the four senators also urge that the committee allocate enough money in its 1999 budget resolution for NIH to be granted a \$2 billion, 14.7 per cent increase. Senators Bill Frist (Republican, Tennessee), Connie Mack (Republican, Florida), Dianne Feinstein (Democrat, California) and Edward Kennedy (Democrat, Massachusetts), are now soliciting signatures from other senators.

Japan offers Mars trip – but in name only

[TOKYO] More than 50,000 people have applied to have their names inscribed on a nameplate that will be affixed to Japan's first-ever spacecraft to Mars.

The Institute of Space and Astronautical Science has guaranteed that every name submitted on or before 28 February will be inscribed on the plate.

The names will be photographed, reduced to microscopic size and then etched onto the plate, which measures 2.5 cm square and 0.5 mm thick. The Mars orbiter, PLANET-B, is due for launch in October 1999.

Its primary mission will be to observe the atmosphere of Mars.