

EUTYCHUS

Embryo stem cell research

America's doctors have defied President George Bush by putting their stamp of approval on scientists engaged in stem cell research. The American Medical Association (AMA) said that it was ethical to use cloning for research, but not to copy another human being. Michael Goldrich, who heads the AMA's ethics committee, said, 'This is giving guidance to physicians on the science and the ethics. We can't remain silent.' (*The Guardian* 2003; 19 June) Whilst adult stem cell research is making great strides, scientists have just for the first time used cloned stem cells to cure mice with a version of Parkinson's disease at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre in New York (*The Times* 2003; 22 September)

A 'grotesque obscenity'

The UN and World Health Organisation have condemned western governments for neglecting Africa's Aids pandemic whilst lavishing money and attention on the war on terrorism. UN secretary general's special envoy for HIV/Aids in Africa, Stephen Lewis, denounced as a 'grotesque obscenity' the lack of cheap anti-Aids drugs in Africa and warned that millions of orphans would be left traumatised.

'How can this be happening, in the year 2003, when we can find over \$200bn (£120bn) to fight a war on terrorism but we can't find the money to prevent children from living in terror?' Lewis was speaking at the opening of a week-long conference in Nairobi, Kenya, which has gathered 8,000 doctors, researchers, policymakers and activists for a 'conference of war' against the disease.

Of the 42 million people in the world with HIV, about 30million are in Africa. About 15 million Africans have died, a toll likely to soar as HIV infection in southern Africa hits 40% of the population. Despite a steep fall in the price of life-extending anti-retroviral drugs, only 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa apparently have access to them. The UN has a shortfall of \$3bn in a plan to provide drugs to 3 million people, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa, by the end of 2005. (*The Guardian* 2003; 23 September)

Going back in time

The life of Christ ranks third in the historical events British young people would like to witness if given the chance to travel back in time. Of the top ten in the survey the Moon Landing (1969) and England's World Cup win over Germany (1966) came in first and second, with the big bang and the extinction of the dinosaurs a distant 9th and 10th respectively. The 'birth/crucifixion and miracles of Christ' was the only historical event more than 60 years ago that made the top eight in the survey of 3,000 readers aged 18 to 44. (*Metro* 2003; 15 September:6)

Nanotechnology on the make

The government has announced that it is commissioning the Royal Society to undertake an investigation into the benefits and problems of nanotechnology suggesting that it views this new industry seriously. Manipulating substances at the 'nano' level will impact society in electronics and defence, to energy, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, fabrics and cosmetics. Current global spending on nanotech is in excess of £2.42bn, and by 2015 is predicted to exceed £600bn every year. Over 30 governments have launched nanoscience initiatives and there are around 500 nanotech companies involved. The Select committee reports next Spring. (*The Guardian* 2003; 12 June)

Confidentiality under threat

Doctors are concerned that new powers permitting the CHAI (Commission for Health Care Audit and Inspection) to look at patients' records if it deems access 'necessary or expedient' will undermine patient confidentiality. The proposals form part of the Government's new Health and Social Care Bill, which will create the new commission to oversee healthcare standards, and has just had its second reading in the House of Lords. The General Medical Council and Medical Defence Union have both expressed concern about the new measures which mean that anyone refusing to cooperate could face prosecution. CHAI will replace CHI (The Commission for Health Improvement). (*British Medical Journal* 2003; 327:580, 13 September)

Doctor patient relationship

The doctor patient relationship ranks second in importance only to family relationships and is more important than relationships with coworkers or spiritual and financial advisers according to a major study presented at the World Medical Association's annual general assembly in Helsinki. The telephone survey of 3,707 patients and doctors in the US, UK, Canada, Germany South Africa and Japan gave similar results in all countries. In addition less than 20% of patients in all countries defined the doctor-patient relationship as authoritarian or paternalistic. Doctors were also seen as the most trusted source of health information. 'The doctor-physician relationship is part of the critical underpinning of stable societies', said Mike Magee, WMA senior fellow in the humanities, who presented the data. (*British Medical Journal* 2003; 327:581, 13 September)

We are all disabled

2003 is the European Year of Disabled People, but also the 50th anniversary of Watson and Crick's discovery of the structure of DNA. Tom Shakespeare, Director of Outreach at Newcastle University, argues that many disabled people are reacting with hurt and hostility to the hyperbole of genetics advocates. 'Old genetics focused on stopping certain people becoming parents. New genetics gives people knowledge so that they can avoid the birth of disabled babies... Genetics has the potential to be a great servant, but it should never be the master of society. It cannot become the basis by which we value one another.' He further points out that we are all disabled. 'Every one of us has genetic mutations, potential genetic disease (and) our similarities are far greater than our differences. Our differences amount to less than a tenth of one percent of our genome.' (*The Independent* 2003; 12 September:17)

Persons or possessions?

One of the two women who lost their legal battle to have their embryos implanted without the consent of their former partners, has spoken of her despair at the decision. Lorraine Hadley commented: 'An embryo is not just a possession to be divided up in the divorce proceedings. It is a baby in the making. I fully accept that men have rights too. But I find it abhorrent that we should be allowed to create these little human beings - and then flush them down the toilet on a whim. Why should one of us have the right to say the embryos should be destroyed simply because it doesn't suit them any more?' (*Daily Mail* 2003; 2 October) There are currently 116,000 embryos frozen in England and Wales.