

NEWS BITES

INTERNATIONAL

AIDS scientists probe puzzle of 'elite controllers'

Matt Traywick has been HIV-positive for 20 years, but his body has been able to control the virus without drugs – Matt and others like him are known as 'elite controllers'. Elite controllers of AIDS are extremely rare, numbering about 2 000 and accounting for an estimated third of 1% of known HIV-positive people. They are 'viraemic controllers' – healthy infected people whose immune systems keep the virus at low but detectable levels in the blood without drugs, and are of keen interest to AIDS researchers. 'I would say we still don't have the faintest idea why these people are doing as well as they are,' said Dr Bruce Walker, a Harvard professor and director of the Partners AIDS Research Center at Massachusetts General Hospital. 'Achieving the state these guys have reached in their bodies – if we could do that through some intervention, we could solve the AIDS epidemic.'

Brain sensor helps paraplegics

A paraplegic moved the pointer on a computer screen, opened his e-mails and controlled mechanical objects, all with the use of a brain sensor and by merely thinking about the objects, researchers have said. The 25-year-old is one of four patients with spinal injuries, muscular dystrophy and motor neuron disease who are taking part in a trial of a brain-to-movement system developed by Cyberkinetics Neurotechnology Systems in Massachusetts. The researchers implanted a silicon disk with 100 electrodes in the area of the brain that is responsible for movement. The working of the cells was recorded and sent to a computer which decoded the orders.

Student jailed for selling illegal abortion pills in NZ

Chinese student Jinfeng Zhu (24), who illegally imported and sold abortion pills over the Internet, was jailed for 20 months in Auckland last month after what the Ministry of Health said was the first prosecution of its kind in New Zealand. The court was told Zhu's parents bought abortion-inducing and contraceptive medicines in China and sent them to her to sell on the Internet. The ministry said that under the New Zealand Crimes Act, she was effectively supplying the means to procure an abortion.

Doctor, nurses arrested for post-Katrina 'mercy killings'

Three days after hurricane Katrina, the nursing director at Memorial Medical Center huddled with other officials outside the emergency room. The clinic was surrounded by 3 metres of putrid floodwater. Hundreds of people were stranded inside, the power was out and the toilets were backing up. The nursing director reported that some patients were very sick and probably could not be evacuated. What were they going to do? Last month Louisiana Attorney-General Charles Fofi alleged that a doctor and two nurses decided to administer lethal doses of morphine and a sedative, Versed, to at least four trapped and desperately ill patients. They have been arrested and accused of second-degree murder. All three the accused are pleading innocent.

Humans to test bird flu vaccine

A British drug company, PowerMed, is seeking permission to conduct the first human trials of an experimental vaccine against the H5N1 strain of the avian flu virus. Plans for the trial have been submitted to the UK Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, which is expected to give the green light for the trial to proceed at a London hospital. Unlike conventional vaccines, which use weakened strains or fragments of the harmful virus, the test vaccine uses strands of DNA that can be made quickly and cheaply.

'Designer vaginas' are mutilation too

A leading doctor has accused Western plastic surgeons who perform plastic surgery on the vagina of undermining the battle against female circumcision in other parts of the world. Writing in the *British Medical Journal*, Ronan Conroy says the growing acceptance of so-called 'designer vaginas' is exposing Western double standards. There is an assumption by Western critics that in the developing world, the practice is forced on young girls. 'The tone with which those in richer countries criticise female genital mutilation would be more credible if we did not practise it ourselves,' he adds.

Over my dead, charred body...

A doctor suspected of blowing up his New York City town house rather than allowing his ex-wife to benefit from its sale has died nearly a week after suffering critical injuries in the blast, a hospital spokesperson said last month. Dr Nicholas Bartha (66) died on a Saturday evening. Authorities have said they were investigating whether the doctor might have caused the explosion rather than sell his house as part of a divorce agreement. The physician was a lone occupant during the blast.

Technology preventing theft could help surgeons

Technology used to prevent shop theft, could soon be used by surgeons to prevent surgical materials such as gauze cloths, remaining in patients after operations. Medics came up with the idea to develop gauze with radio frequency identity disks, which will set off an alarm if left inside a patient. According to the medical journal *Archives of Surgery*, doctors leave surgical materials in their patients in one out of every 15 000 operations.

Mothers-to-be hasten labour by having sex

Women who have sexual intercourse during late pregnancy are more likely than abstinent women to have a spontaneous delivery at 38 – 40 weeks and less likely to require labour induction. It is commonly believed that coitus hastens labour, but very little research has been published to confirm this theory, Dr Peng Chiong Tan and associates point out in the medical journal *Obstetrics and Gynaecology*. Tan's team also found that having intercourse more than once per week was inversely associated with prolonged pregnancy and the need for labour induction.

AFRICA

Seal rights group warns Namibia of health risk

Animal rights group Seal Alert-SA has called for the resignation of Abraham Iyambo, Namibia's fisheries and marine resources minister, before his 'irresponsible behaviour' plunges the region into another health crisis. The ministry said last month that if the culling of seals was a problem, Namibians should develop a taste for seal meat. This statement was met with shock by Seal Alert-SA, which had started a campaign to end the Namibian seal cull by two concessionaires. According to the group the jackals and predating on the two mainland sealing colonies have all tested positive or as carriers of rabies and canine distemper virus. Seals also potentially carry a multitude of viruses and diseases, such as pox virus, hepatitis, influenza, morbillivirus, salmonella, mycobacteriosis, staphylococcus, candidiasis, toxoplasma, lung, stomach, heart and hook worms which could threaten human health.

SOUTH AFRICA

Sexual offences bill delayed again

The long-awaited sexual offences bill, which sought to make the deliberate transmission of HIV/AIDS a criminal offence, has been withdrawn after being stalled for more than 2 years. Many of the non-governmental organisations that operate in the realm of sexual offences and assistance to victims have been calling for the bill to be urgently tabled in Parliament. It last appeared on the agenda of Parliament's justice committee before the election in April 2004.

Briefing the committee on the redrafted bill, justice department officials said that on the basis of instructions of the committee in 2004, they had included a section that would have made it a statutory crime to deliberately infect another person with HIV/AIDS. But when the redrafted bill was sent to cabinet for approval, it was ordered that the particular section be removed.

Committee chairwoman Fatima Chohan noted that the deliberate transmission of HIV/AIDS would still be covered by the common law crimes of murder, attempted murder, culpable homicide and assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm. The bill does provide for the compulsory testing of an accused rapist or sexual offender before a magistrate to determine whether or not they are HIV-positive.

The section is designed to give a victim the knowledge of an accused attacker's HIV status so that appropriate drugs can be administered. The bill insists, however, that the results of the HIV test can be made known only to the victim, the accused and the investigating officer.

Basic medical benefit plan mooted

The introduction of a proposed basic benefit plan could change the way medical schemes operate, leaving them to compete on 'extra benefits', while everyone on medical aid can expect the same minimum package of cover. The basic benefit plan will be an extension of the prescribed minimum benefits, which have already been rolled out with a chronic diseases list. The idea is that medical scheme members will have the same basic package, regardless of which scheme they belong to, and will then have the option of subscribing for extra benefits as offered by individual schemes. Speaking at the annual Board of Healthcare Funders in Durban last month, Pat Sidley, spokesperson for the Council for Medical Schemes, said the plan was nowhere near a point where anything was actively happening. She said it was quite likely that 'some form of a basic benefit plan would be implemented in the future', but the Council was still considering comment from stakeholders after publishing a circular about the basic benefit plan on its website earlier this year. Anban Pillay, the director of pricing and economic policy at the health department, said there had not yet been any decisions on what the basic benefit plan would include or how much it would cost.

Netcare acquires interest in stem-cell storing group

The South African health care group, Netcare, acquired a 75% interest in a stem-cell storing company, Biocells, which markets and collects umbilical cord blood. In a statement, Netcare said that Biocells, that will be trading as Netcell Therapeutics, will process and store the blood at Bio-Vault, an internationally accredited laboratory in Britain.

Chris Bateman