

VITUALIS' MEDICAL RANTS

THE MUSINGS OF A JUNIOR DOCTOR... YES, A TORTURED SOUL AND QUITE POSSIBLY A
DISTURBED MIND.

Volume 2
Collection: July 2005 to December 2005

First Edition

Dr. Michael Tam, *B. Sc. (med), M.B., B.S. (University of NSW)*

:: dedication ::

*To all my readers, many
thanks for your support; and
to my lovely wife, whose
patience made this book
possible.*

Published by Lulu.com 2005

© 2005 by virtualis Productions, Michael Tam. Some rights reserved.

License

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5

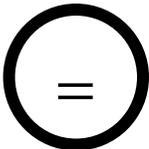
You are free to copy, distribute, display, and perform the work under the following conditions:



Attribution. You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.



Noncommercial. You may not use this work for commercial purposes.



No Derivative Works. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

- For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work.
- Any of these conditions can be waived if you get permission from the copyright holder.

Your fair use and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Preface

In the second half of the year 2005, an evolution in the character of the “vitalis’ Medical Rants” blog took place. Although initially reborn in October 2004 as a mostly biomedical news blog site, there were also articles on technological developments as well as some on ethical issues and current affairs. In this half year collection, “non-biomedical” issues are numerous and there have progressively been more frequent articles on international politics, US foreign policy as well as law and justice.

During the period this book was created, there were no particularly outstanding biomedical discoveries or advances. Perhaps the most significant development during these 6 months was the explosion of public and media awareness of the H5N1 avian influenza (i.e., “bird flu”) and its trickle of human casualties across South-East Asia, and gradual spread in bird populations into Eastern Europe. The other rather exciting news was that the 2005 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine was won by two Australians, Robin Warren and Barry Marshall for their work on *Helicobacter pylori*.

The focus on political topics was somewhat reactionary to what I perceived to be ever more questionable practices and attitudes by the governments of the “coalition of the willing” of the Iraq war; specifically, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. As such, many articles were devoted to criticisms to

such practices as “extraordinary rendition” as well as the detention without charge of the Guantanamo Bay “illegal combatants”.

Similar to the previous releases and versions of “vitualis' Medical Rants”, a digital version in Adobe PDF format is available on-line. Unlike the printed first edition of the *Volume One*, which was only available in soft cover, *Volume Two* has been released in both soft cover and hardcover formats.

This second volume was particularly enjoyable to compile and write and I hope that you, dear reader, find my collection of articles interesting and hopefully, thought-provoking.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Michael Tam
B.Sc.(med), M.B., B.S. (*UNSW*)

24th December 2005

Original preface to volume one

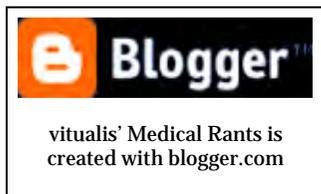
A brief history of the universe?

If “*virtualis’ Medical Rants*” were the universe, it would be a strange and twisted world that we live. But would it be any more bizarre than it already is? “*virtualis’ Medical Rants*” is a “weblog” or, the more commonly used vernacular, “blog”. And what is a “blog”? Well, according to Wikipedia,

‘A weblog (usually shortened to blog, but occasionally spelled web log) is a web-based publication consisting primarily of periodic articles (normally in reverse chronological order). Although most early weblogs were manually updated, tools to automate the maintenance of such sites made them accessible to a much larger population, and the use of some sort of web application software is now a typical aspect of “blogging.”

My blog started out in April 2003 as a semi-regular journal with anecdotes of the weird and wonderful people and situations encountered by a junior doctor. It was as much an excuse to try out a new technology called “blogger” (<http://www.blogger.com>) which I had heard about (being a bit of a technophile) as to contribute to the ever growing literary junk that was filling cyberspace.

Unfortunately, this was not to be. Unlike the exciting and dynamic life seen in television series such as “ER” or “Chicago Hope” or “Scrubs”, 95% of a junior doctor’s job is menial (and



possibly demeaning!), routine and frankly boring. I quickly realised that there was not much hope for a blog that states, “Not much happened today... another 2 patients admitted with pneumonia” or something to that effect for the vast majority of the time. On the few occasions when something cool did happen in hospital, I was inevitably too tired to type it out. And so, “vitualis’ Medical Rants” was abandoned to cyberspace for approximately six months.

In October 2004, reinvigorated with a new sense of purpose (which may have had been an undiagnosed episode of mania), I decided to lift my site out of the obscurity of the cyber-gutter and transformed “vitualis’ Medical Rants” into a biomedical / sometimes technological / at times ethical / on occasion “rage against the system” news site. At around this time, Pyra Labs (which owned and created blogger.com) was bought by Google and a new beta version was out. I’m not entirely sure what changed, but a number of new site templates were released which gave “vitualis’ Medical Rants” a much needed face lift.

To celebrate this renaissance, this book compiling the news articles as well as copies of the original source articles was created. At the time of publication, an Adobe PDF (portable document format) e-book version was available for download. It is planned that biannual collections will be created in the future.

vitualis' Medical Rants - Mozilla Firefox

File Edit View Go Bookmarks Tools Help

VITUALIS' MEDICAL RANTS

THE MUSINGS OF A JUNIOR DOCTOR, ... YET, A TORTURED SOUL AND QUITE POSSIBLY A DISTURBED MIND.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 24, 2005

The Rings of Uranus



Ring-world Uranus

The Hubble Space Telescope is truly one of the marvels of scientific, no, human endeavors of the twentieth century. It has recently discovered the existence of two additional faint rings around Uranus, not previously seen by the Voyager 2 space probe on its journey to the outer solar system and its findings are soon to be published in Science.

From: Yahoo! News

ABOUT ME



MICHAEL TAM
SYDNEY, NEW SOUTH WALES, AUSTRALIA

I'm a General Practice Registrar stumbling through the NSW hospital system at present. My enthusiasm has long been twisted into wry bitter humour by the endless stream of gomers. The 'House of God' is real and I have undeniable proof that the human species is not intelligent...

[VIEW MY COMPLETE PROFILE](#)

SUBSCRIPTION

[Subscribe to this blog](#)

 [RSS FEED](#)

[Return Home](#)

PREVIOUS POSTS

[The Rings of Uranus](#)

[Saddam trial descends into farce](#)

[Judge rules against 'Intelligent Design'](#)

[George 'Big Brother' Bush](#)

[Iran spiralling in mindless theocracy](#)

[Wikipedia as good as Encyclopedia Britannica](#)

[Doctrine of 'pre-emptive' war](#)

[E-link Zevlevs finally in 2006?](#)

[Bird flu in the Ukraine](#)

[Howard's denial](#)

ARCHIVES:

[- Archives -](#)

More Rings Are Found Around Planet Uranus
Thu Dec 22, 4:35 PM ET

LOS ANGELES - Astronomers aided by the Hubble Space Telescope have spied two more rings encircling Uranus, the first additions to the planet's ring system in nearly two decades.

The faint, dusty rings orbit outside of Uranus' previously known rings, but within the orbits of its large moons, said Mark Showalter, an astronomer at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, Calif., who made the discovery.

Details will appear online Friday in the journal Science. The discovery, announced Thursday, means scientists now believe the seventh planet from the sun possesses 15 rings.

In 1986, Voyager 2 became the first spacecraft to zip past Uranus and beam back thousands of images of its dazzling rings and numerous moons.

Done Adobe

vitualis' Medical Rants – December 2005

Who is vitalis?

Quite possibly a disturbed individual. ;-) His not-so-secret alter-ego is Michael Tam, currently a “doctor-in-training” in the General Practice training program in NSW, Australia. Michael Tam studied medicine at the University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia and



graduated at the end of 2002. Internship and residency years were in the Illawarra Area Health Service – mainly based at The Wollongong Hospital and Shellharbour Public Hospital. Michael has worked in Emergency Medicine, General Medicine, Orthopaedic Surgery, Psychiatry, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, General Surgery, Neurology/Stroke Unit and Rehabilitation Medicine. At the first publication of this book, Michael was a senior resident/General Practice registrar in Paediatric Gastroenterology at The Sydney Children’s Hospital, Randwick. From 2006, Michael will be working in General Practice registrar in community General Practice.

Michael’s professional interests include primary health care and public health, as well as aged care and rehabilitation medicine as well as chronic pain management.

Recreational interests include digital imaging and video, technology and computer sciences. He is a moderator at the

forums of Videohelp.com, the largest on-line discussion forum on general home video editing and authoring.

Previous printed publications include “photographic profundus”, an album of natural photography and traditional Chinese proverbs, as well as the previous volumes of “vitualis' Medical Rants”.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	v
Original preface to volume one	ix
Who is vitualis?.....	xiii

July 2005

Mysteries of Saturn.....	2
Palm ditches Cobalt	6
GDNF – uncertain future for Parkinson's drug	8
Effective Lassa fever vaccine developed!.....	11
Vitamin C does not prevent colds.....	14
Hubble spots Sauron in the sky.....	17
Are we headed towards a technological “dark age”?.....	20
Terrorist attack in London	26
Rubbery photo longevity ratings	29
Sasser Worm creator sentenced	36
The question of open and unprotected Wi-Fi networks	38
Jeb Bush drops persecution of Michael Schiavo.....	41
Promising new HIV drug.....	44
The great swindle of our genetic code	46
New quick finger test for osteoporosis	50
Viagra may cause blindness.....	53
Controversy over the planned West Bank barrier.....	55
Improved vitamin controls in Europe	58
New Harry Potter book accidentally sold early.....	63
Religion can be used to explain anything.....	65
Irritable bowel syndrome and food allergy?	68
MP3 is 10 years old	71
The brave new world of “smart” drugs.....	74
Lorenzo's Oil	78
Fujitsu full colour e-paper	81
Pope Benedict is not a Potter fan	84

Parasite genomes have been sequenced.....	87
Firefox’s market share creeps upwards.....	91
Labour politics of the medical workforce in Venezuela	93
The criminalisation of the mentally ill	96
Prayer power – ineffective for health outcomes	99
Immigration department a result of Ruddock’s ineptitude.....	102
Sixty year anniversary of first atomic blast test	109
ENPP1 gene linked to diabetes and obesity	113
Harry Potter mania.....	116
Cooling off to control epilepsy.....	118
Iraq war civilian death count 25,000	126
Dark chocolate for hypertension	128
British police kill innocent man in anti-terror action.....	131
Hormone useful for weight loss.....	136
Cats cannot taste sugar	139
New planet discovered!	142

August 2005

Echinacea ineffective for colds	150
Cannabinoids in inflammatory bowel disease	152
Guantanamo Bay and David Hicks	156
Meet Snuppy	158
Regression evident in the Vatican	162
60th anniversary of atomic bombing of Hiroshima.....	164
The rise of fake medicines	168
Super cute baby panda!	171
The US Government continues to hide Abu Graib.....	172
Y-shaped nanotubes are natural transistors	175
Reactive astrocytes may be the cause of epilepsy	178
Brazilian’s death from tragedy to travesty	182
The stupidity of US “anti-terror” policy	184
Israeli “disengagement” proceeds	186
Foetal skin for burns.....	191

Merck loses Vioxx case – \$US 253.4 million	193
Moral arguments by statistics	197
DIY doctor makes own endoscope!	201
The Department of Immigration	204
Homeopathy no better than placebo.....	207
Terrorism is only attacks by “enemies of Israel”	212
Mobile phones do not cause cancer.....	214
Aggregated carbon nanorods – harder than diamond.....	217

September 2005

Regeneration in mice	222
Katrina betrays the fragility of civilisation.....	225
Philips reveals rollable display	231
Bush's tapestry of spin and incompetence starts to unravel.....	233
Ebay buys Skype!	236
The first Windows powered Treo	239
Of politics and the health system	240

October 2005

Australians win 2005 Nobel Prize for Medicine	244
Bird flu spreading to Europe	247
Earthquake in Pakistan	250
World's oldest noodles.....	253
Harriet Miers – religious nut and crony	256
Public hospital crisis driven by staff shortages	260
A case for Herceptin	264
New laws turn Australia into a “secret state”	267
The beginnings of cybernetics	283

November 2005

More moons around Pluto.....	288
Americans start to see the real Bush	292

The Contrarian.....	294
The wrath of Saddam.....	297
Vatican supports Evolutionary Theory	301
Bush and his two-faced approach to torture.....	304
Another of Saddam’s trial lawyer murdered	307
Smoking and PTSD.....	310
Kansas – officially the dumbest place on Earth.....	312
A disaster unfolding in slow motion.....	315
Bush and “revisionism”	318
“Ideology trumps innovation”	323
Fake anti-malarials.....	327
US keeps hold of the keys to the internet.....	331
Intelligent Design is poor theology	335
White phosphorus used as combat weapon.....	339
Human bird flu death confirmed in China.....	343
US refuses UN access to Guantanamo Bay	345
We need more religious moderates.....	348
Discovery of a new immune system in the jaw	351
Viral therapy for cancers	353
Ariel Sharon breaks away from Likud.....	363
China allows UN torture investigation.....	367
Second confirmed bird flu death in China	369
Could there already be 300 deaths?	372
Bush and the Al-Jazeera plot.....	375
Chomsky: Hegemony or Survival.....	379
Say no to the proposed anti-terror laws.....	381
New CPR guidelines.....	386

December 2005

Iraqi civil war has already begun.....	394
Union of the Two Towers in Israel	399
World first face transplant.....	402
Hypocrisy over capital punishment	406

“Stoned” driving doubles fatal crash risk.....	409
Reflections of the Internet – Part I	411
Reflections of the Internet – Part II.....	415
Reflections of the Internet – Part III.....	419
When justice fails – the story of Khaled Masri	424
Artemisinin resistance reported.....	436
Stress causes impaired healing.....	438
New animal discovered in Borneo.....	442
Big balls, little brain.....	445
United States and torture	447
Pacifiers and cot death.....	452
Law lords rule against torture	455
A short black for me and another for my liver	459
Ethnic tensions ignite on Cronulla beach	461
China: an economic powerhouse.....	464
IT industry just doesn't understand health.....	467
Howard's denial	471
Bird flu in the Ukraine.....	474
E-ink devices finally in 2006?	476
Doctrine of “pre-emptive” war	480
Wikipedia as good as Encyclopædia Britannica.....	487
Iran spiralling in mindless theocracy.....	490
George “Big Brother” Bush.....	493
Judge rules against “Intelligent Design”	501
Saddam trial descends into farce.....	504
The Rings of Uranus	510

July 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Mysteries of Saturn

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/mysteries-of-saturn.html>

The Cassini spacecraft has returned some interesting findings on Saturn that will be sure to have astronomers busy for at least the next decade. Firstly, it has found that the rings of Saturn have their own atmosphere, and of oxygen no less. Secondly, it appears that the rotation of Saturn has slowed down by 7 minutes since it was looked at by Pioneer and Voyager (about 20 years ago). The reasons for this are still unknown.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4640641.stm>

Saturn rings have own atmosphere

By Paul Rincon

BBC News science reporter

Saturn's vast and majestic ring system has its own atmosphere – separate from that of the planet itself, according to data from the Cassini spacecraft.

And Saturn is rotating seven minutes more slowly than when probes measured its spin in the 70s and 80s – an observation experts cannot yet explain.

Cassini-Huygens mission scientists are celebrating the spacecraft's first year in orbit around the ringed planet.

Details were unveiled at the British Festival of Space 2005 in Birmingham.

By making close flybys of the ring system, Cassini has been able to determine that the atmosphere around the rings is composed principally of molecular oxygen (O₂).

Welcome confirmation

The finding was made by two experiments on Cassini: the Ion and Neutral Mass Spectrometer (INMS) and Cassini Plasma Science (Caps) instrument.

“The INMS sees the neutral oxygen gas, Caps sees the ionised products of that oxygen and the electrons associated with it. There is an enhancement over the rings,” said Dr Andrew Coates, co-investigator for the Caps instrument, told the BBC News website.

Dr Coates, from the Mullard Space Science Laboratory (MSSL) at University College London, said the atmosphere was very similar to that of Jupiter’s moons Europa and Ganymede.

“As water comes off the rings, the hydrogen is lost from it, leaving the oxygen,” he explained.

Saturn’s rings consist largely of water ice mixed with smaller amounts of rocky matter. Dr Coates said the ring atmosphere was probably kept in check by gravitational forces and a balance between loss of material from the ring system and a resupply of material from elsewhere.

Scientists admitted they were surprised by the finding that Saturn’s rotation is slowing.

“The rotation seems to have slowed down by about seven minutes compared to what was inferred from the Pioneer and Voyager data, but we don’t actually understand why,” said Professor Michele Dougherty, principal investigator for Cassini’s magnetometer instrument.

Surprise finding

Data from the magnetometer and Cassini's Radio and Plasma Wave Science (RPWS) instrument both seem to show the slow down in Saturn's rotation.

"You would expect the rotation of the planet to slow down if its internal dynamo had stopped, but that does not seem to be the case with Saturn," Professor Dougherty, from Imperial College London, told the BBC News website.

The internal dynamo is the source of a planet's magnetic field and requires rotation and a fluid core. Professor Dougherty said it was possible the instruments were observing "rotational regions" closer to the surface of Saturn rather than anything to do with the dynamo itself.

"If you sit down and think about it, it's very difficult to come up with a scenario where the interior of the planet is slowing down," she said.

UK science and innovation minister Lord Sainsbury, who was at the briefing in Birmingham, praised UK scientists involved in Cassini-Huygens as the orbiter celebrated its first year in orbit around Saturn.

"The scientists and engineers in this country have played an integral role, making it the biggest British success story in space of the last 12 months," Lord Sainsbury said.

Cassini performed its Saturn Orbit Insertion (SOI) on 1 July 2004 after a six-year, three billion-kilometre trek.

In December 2004, it released its piggybacked Huygens probe, which performed a successful touchdown on Saturn's moon Titan in January this year.

The mission is a co-operative mission between the US space agency Nasa, the European Space Agency (Esa) and the Italian Space Agency (Asi).

Palm ditches Cobalt

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/palm-ditches-cobalt.html>

As I predicted last year, PalmOne (which has apparently changed back to straight old “Palm” now) is going to drop support from Cobalt (aka Palm OS 6) and going straight for Linux. IMHO, they should have stopped pussy-footing around long ago and concentrated their attention Linux.

Source article

<http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000797048999/>

PalmSource focusing 100% on Linux-based smartphone OS

Posted Jul 1, 2005, 10:40 AM ET by Peter Rojas

Related entries: Cellphones, Handhelds

We already mumbled something yesterday about how PalmSource was having a rough year, but apparently the company is going for broke and pouring 100% of their efforts into developing Linux-based versions of the Palm OS for smartphones. Earlier this week Interim CEO Patrick McVeigh revealed that they're, “delaying all development of products not directly related to this,” and that they expect to roll out a version of their Linux-based smartphone OS for low-end phones by summer of 2006, with a 2nd version for high-end handsets to follow sometime later in the year. Ok, we get that the smartphones (and not children) are the future and all that, but what we're still trying to figure out is how palmOne (which is soon to become just “Palm” again) fits into this. They've already been notoriously cagey about switching over to Cobalt, the next version of the Palm operating system (pictured at right), but let's face it, they can't stick with Palm OS 5 forever, can they? This announcement means that Cobalt is more or less dead (halting development on an OS that isn't even out yet is hardly an

encouraging sign), so if palmOne/Palm decides it can't wait as long as a year and a half for PalmSource to bust out their new high-end OS for smartphones that could very well leave them with little choice but to switch over to Windows Mobile.

GDNF – uncertain future for Parkinson's drug

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/gdnf-uncertain-future-for-parkinsons.html>

Glial cell-line derived neurotropic factor (GDNF) has recently been shown to stimulate the growth of nerve cells in patients with Parkinson's disease. The drug was delivered directed to the area of the brain affected via a small catheter. These patients (5) also had improvements in their symptoms.

Unfortunately, this puts this particular research at somewhat of a quandary. GDNF had been withdrawn by the drug company (Amgen) over fears of toxicity. It will be interesting to see how this develops further.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7619&feedId=online-news_rss20

Parkinson's drug prompts brain cell growth

- 16:55 01 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Rowan Hooper

A drug that relieves the symptoms of Parkinson's disease – but was controversially withdrawn over toxicity fears – has now been shown to stimulate growth of the nerve fibres damaged by the disease.

When delivered directly to the brain, glial cell-line derived neurotrophic factor (GDNF) had been shown to stimulate regrowth of cells in animal models of Parkinson's. But this is the first time regrowth has been seen in

the human brain, says Steven Gill, a neurosurgeon at Frenchay Hospital, Bristol, UK.

Gill was running a trial study where five patients with advanced Parkinson's disease were fitted with a tiny catheter that delivered GDNF direct to the putamen, part of the basal ganglia in the centre of the brain. In the putamen of Parkinson's patients the chemical messenger dopamine is lost.

The symptoms of Parkinson's – which include uncontrollable shaking and trembling – were reduced in all five patients. They showed dramatic improvements with respect to their motor skills, verbal memory, facial expressions and motivation.

Frustrating situation

However, Amgen, the company that makes GDNF, withdrew the drug after fears over its toxicity and a second trial of 34 patients was halted. That was despite the fact that the toxicity trials involved testing far higher doses of GDNF on animal models, and that none of the human subjects had showed any ill-effects.

“For people with Parkinson's disease the situation is frustrating when we've seen significant benefits of GDNF,” says Gill. In the US, some patients involved in halted clinical trials are taking legal action to try to force Amgen to supply them with the drug.

Gill, Seth Love, and colleagues were able to demonstrate the regrowth of cells in the human brain after a patient in the original GDNF trial later died of a heart attack. Examination of his brain showed that nerve fibres in the putamen had “sprouted” – specifically in the substantia nigra region where the cells that produce dopamine are sited.

This patient had suffered from unilateral Parkinson's disease, where only half the brain is affected. Therefore a catheter had been fitted only to that

half of the brain, enabling the researchers to demonstrate that nerves had sprouted only in the area treated with GDNF.

Journal reference: Nature Medicine (DOI: [10.1038/nm0705-703](https://doi.org/10.1038/nm0705-703))

Effective Lassa fever vaccine developed!

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/effective-lassa-fever-vaccine.html>

The Lassa virus causes a haemorrhagic fever (i.e., like Ebola) and is absolutely frightening in terms of its mortality rate. New Scientist has just reported that an effective vaccine (against non-human primates so far) has been developed!

It has been suggested, for example, that the “Black Death” that swept into Europe was actually a haemorrhagic fever rather than the bubonic plague.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7594&feedId=online-news_rss20

Lassa fever vaccine gives complete protection

- 14:33 28 June 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Melissa Lee Phillips

A new vaccine that completely protects non-human primates against Lassa haemorrhagic fever has been demonstrated. It uses the same technology that researchers recently used to create vaccines for the Ebola and Marburg viruses.

“We have a vaccine system here that looks really promising,” says Thomas W Geisbert, at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Maryland.

Lassa haemorrhagic fever is endemic to several countries in West Africa and is estimated to infect more than 200,000 people each year, killing a few

thousand. That makes it a much bigger public-health problem than Ebola or Marburg, says Susan Fisher-Hoch of the University of Texas at Brownsville, US. Treatment with an anti-viral drug is sometimes effective, but only if given soon after disease onset.

The Lassa virus is transmitted to humans from rodents, and people can also pass it to each other. In the past few years, several travellers returning to Europe or the US from Africa have been found to be infected with Lassa, but they have not spread the disease to others.

The risk of Lassa fever spreading outside of Africa is probably quite small, says Geisbert, unless the virus mutates into a more transmissible form. But “where it’s endemic, it really matters,” adds Fisher-Hoch.

Protective envelope

The vaccine trial was led by Geisbert and Steven Jones of the Public Health Agency of Canada in Manitoba. First, they obtained the genetic sequence for the surface glycoprotein that forms Lassa’s outer protective envelope. Then they put this into an altered form of another virus, called vesicular stomatitis virus (VSV), where it was also expressed on the surface.

The researchers immunised four macaque monkeys with this Lassa vaccine and injected two control monkeys with their vaccine for Ebola Zaire instead. After 28 days, all six macaques were injected with a lethal dose of Lassa virus.

The two control animals developed fever, rash and anorexia, and succumbed to the disease less than two weeks after virus exposure. But the four vaccinated monkeys “showed no clinical evidence of illness at all”, says Geisbert. They developed strong immune responses against Lassa, including both antibody and white blood cell responses, he notes.

The Lassa VSV vaccine is a good candidate for use in humans, Geisbert believes. That is because VSV does not cause severe side effects, as do some other virus vehicles, and the vaccine confers protection after only one injection.

“This is clearly the vaccine that’s needed for Lassa fever,” says Fisher-Hoch. But she also notes one potential problem, which is that many viruses, including HIV, are being inserted into VSV for use as vaccines. If VSV is used to deliver too many vaccines, it is possible that some people will develop immunity against VSV itself, and the vaccines will no longer work in those populations.

Journal reference: Public Library of Science Medicine (vol 2, p e183)

Vitamin C does not prevent colds

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/vitamin-c-does-not-prevent-colds.html>

It has always helped fuel the alternative medicine people (especially anti-establishment crackpots) that Linus Pauling, two time Nobel Prize winner believed in semi-magical abilities of vitamin C. In particular, that it could halt a variety of disease including the common cold if taken in large doses on a regular basis.

Now, a fairly comprehensive review of the research has been performed. For the general population, there is no benefit in taking vitamin C for colds.

Interestingly, for a small group in “extreme physical stress”, there did benefit from it markedly. However, unless you’re a top level athlete or live high in the Alps in sub-zero conditions, you should spend your money somewhere else.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7590&feedId=online-news_rss20

Regular vitamin C does not prevent colds

- 10:47 28 June 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Emma Young, Sydney

Regular doses of vitamin C will not prevent a cold in most people – though they might reduce its duration slightly, according to a major new review of existing research.

The idea that the vitamin can prevent and treat a cold became popular following the 1970 publication of Nobel laureate Linus Pauling's book, *Vitamin C and the Common Cold*. "Pauling's book was very influential. But I'm confident that the general population doesn't stand to gain any great benefit in terms of colds from taking regular doses," says Robert Douglas of the Australian National University in Canberra, who co-authored the review.

Douglas and Harri Hemilä of the University of Helsinki, Finland, considered 55 studies dating from 1940 to 2004. These studies compared the effect of at least 200 milligrams daily versus a placebo.

From 23 studies investigating prevention in the general population, the pair concluded that regular doses of vitamin C do not reduce the risk of a cold. But they found the duration of any cold that did develop was shortened, though "only by about half a day in adults, and slightly more in children", Douglas notes.

Extreme physical stress

However, people suffering extreme physical stress through exertion or freezing temperatures did benefit substantially from taking vitamin C. Studies of skiers, soldiers and marathon runners suggest that regular vitamin C can slash their incidence of colds in half. Pauling was heavily influenced by a ski school study, in particular.

"I don't understand why – but it does seem there is a small subset of people who do seem to have substantial prevention benefit from taking vitamin C, when for the general population it's zilch," Douglas says.

As well as considering the effect of regular daily doses, the pair also looked at whether starting to take vitamin C as soon as a symptoms appeared could shorten a cold. They found no evidence that it could, except for in one study which involved a huge 8 gram dose on the first day of symptoms.

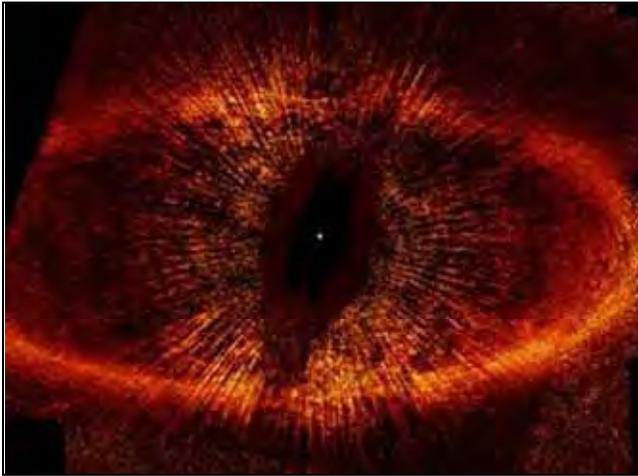
“For all except this 8 gram group, the evidence is quite unimpressive that taking largish doses makes any difference at all once a cold has started,” says Douglas.

Journal reference: PLoS Medicine (Vol 2(6), p e68)

Hubble spots Sauron in the sky

Saturday, July 02, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/hubble-spots-sauron-in-sky.html>



The all-seeing eye

The Hubble space telescope has produced the above image which for all the world looks like the Eye of Sauron!

Source article

<http://www.newscientistspace.com/article.ns?id=dn7564>

Hubble spies lord of the stellar rings

- 18:00 22 June 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Ivan Semeniuk

A spectacular, luminous ring offers the best evidence yet that a nearby star is circled by a newly formed solar system.

The ring is composed of dust particles in orbit around Fomalhaut, a bright star located just 25 light years away in the constellation Pisces Australis – or the Southern Fish. A recent image captured with the Hubble Space

Telescope – which makes the system look uncannily like the Great Eye of Sauron from the blockbusting Lord of the Rings trilogy – confirms that Fomalhaut's ring is curiously offset with respect to the star.

The most likely explanation is that the gravity of one or more unseen planets is dragging the ring askew. The fact that the inner edge of the ring is relatively well-defined adds further weight to the argument because it suggests the unseen planets are sweeping up stray dust within the radius of the ring.

The image was captured by astronomers at the University of California, Berkeley, US, and NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center using Hubble's coronagraph. This device blocks the glare of a star while gathering the faint reflected light from any surrounding ring.

The new image is the first time Fomalhaut's ring has been seen in visible light. This offers a much sharper view than the infrared wavelengths previously used by astronomers. "We are directly imaging the system," says team member Paul Kalas. "The offset is unambiguous and it's been measured with very high accuracy."

Shining example

Astronomers suspect the ring around Fomalhaut is the dusty trace of a belt of small comet-like bodies that surround the star, much like the Kuiper Belt that surrounds our solar system.

Frequent collisions between these bodies generate enough dust to replenish the ring, which would otherwise be eroded by the star's radiation in a relatively short time. Since the Kuiper Belt is a by-product of the creation of our solar system, the ring around Fomalhaut may be similarly linked to planet formation. And because Fomalhaut is only 200 million years old – less than 5% of the Sun's present age – it offers a unique analogue of our solar system's early years.

While strengthening the case for planets around Fomalhaut, the Hubble image also appears to limit their size. “Fomalhaut is young and any planets that formed around it have yet to cool. Anything larger than about five times the mass of Jupiter would still be glowing warm enough to show up in our image,” says Kalas.

He and his colleagues have already booked time on the Hubble to do follow-up observations later in 2005. They hope to search for small details such as gaps or clumps in the rings that could reveal more precisely the masses and locations of any planets.

Journal reference: Nature (vol 435, p 1067)

Are we headed towards a technological “dark age”?

Friday, July 08, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/are-we-headed-towards-are.html>

An American physicist has produced a rather intriguing analysis of the rate of technological development over the past century. Rather than the commonly held view that technological progress has been increasing at an exponential rate, he has shown that we may well be headed towards a technological “dark age”. The rate of new technological progress peaked somewhere around 1900 and has been steadily dropping ever since.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7616&feedId=online-news_rss20

Entering a dark age of innovation

- 14:00 02 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Robert Adler

SURFING the web and making free internet phone calls on your Wi-Fi laptop, listening to your iPod on the way home, it often seems that, technologically speaking, we are enjoying a golden age. Human inventiveness is so finely honed, and the globalised technology industries so productive, that there appears to be an invention to cater for every modern whim.

But according to a new analysis, this view couldn't be more wrong: far from being in technological nirvana, we are fast approaching a new dark age.

That, at least, is the conclusion of Jonathan Huebner, a physicist working at the Pentagon's Naval Air Warfare Center in China Lake, California. He says the rate of technological innovation reached a peak a century ago and has been declining ever since. And like the lookout on the Titanic who spotted the fateful iceberg, Huebner sees the end of innovation looming dead ahead. His study will be published in *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*.

It's an unfashionable view. Most futurologists say technology is developing at exponential rates. Moore's law, for example, foresaw chip densities (for which read speed and memory capacity) doubling every 18 months. And the chip makers have lived up to its predictions. Building on this, the less well-known Kurzweil's law says that these faster, smarter chips are leading to even faster growth in the power of computers. Developments in genome sequencing and nanoscale machinery are racing ahead too, and internet connectivity and telecommunications bandwidth are growing even faster than computer power, catalysing still further waves of innovation.

But Huebner is confident of his facts. He has long been struck by the fact that promised advances were not appearing as quickly as predicted. "I wondered if there was a reason for this," he says. "Perhaps there is a limit to what technology can achieve."

In an effort to find out, he plotted major innovations and scientific advances over time compared to world population, using the 7200 key innovations listed in a recently published book, *The History of Science and Technology* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004). The results surprised him.

Rather than growing exponentially, or even keeping pace with population growth, they peaked in 1873 and have been declining ever since (see Graphs). Next, he examined the number of patents granted in the US from 1790 to the present. When he plotted the number of US patents granted per decade divided by the country's population, he found the graph peaked in 1915.

The period between 1873 and 1915 was certainly an innovative one. For instance, it included the major patent-producing years of America's greatest inventor, Thomas Edison (1847-1931). Edison patented more than 1000 inventions, including the incandescent bulb, electricity generation and distribution grids, movie cameras and the phonograph.

Medieval future

Huebner draws some stark lessons from his analysis. The global rate of innovation today, which is running at seven “important technological developments” per billion people per year, matches the rate in 1600. Despite far higher standards of education and massive R&D funding “it is more difficult now for people to develop new technology”, Huebner says.

Extrapolating Huebner's global innovation curve just two decades into the future, the innovation rate plummets to medieval levels. “We are approaching the ‘dark ages point’, when the rate of innovation is the same as it was during the Dark Ages,” Huebner says. “We'll reach that in 2024.”

But today's much larger population means that the number of innovations per year will still be far higher than in medieval times. “I'm certainly not predicting that the dark ages will reoccur in 2024, if at all,” he says. Nevertheless, the point at which an extrapolation of his global innovation curve hits zero suggests we have already made 85 per cent of the technologies that are economically feasible.

But why does he think this has happened? He likens the way technologies develop to a tree. “You have the trunk and major branches, covering major fields like transportation or the generation of energy,” he says. “Right now we are filling out the minor branches and twigs and leaves. The major question is, are there any major branches left to discover? My feeling is we've discovered most of the major branches on the tree of technology.”

But artificial intelligence expert Ray Kurzweil – who formulated the aforementioned law – thinks Huebner has got it all wrong. “He uses an arbitrary list of about 7000 events that have no basis as a measure of innovation. If one uses arbitrary measures, the results will not be meaningful.”

Eric Drexler, who dreamed up some of the key ideas underlying nanotechnology, agrees. “A more direct and detailed way to quantify technology history is to track various capabilities, such as speed of transport, data-channel bandwidth, cost of computation,” he says. “Some have followed exponential trends, some have not.”

Drexler says nanotechnology alone will smash the barriers Huebner foresees, never mind other branches of technology. It’s only a matter of time, he says, before nanoengineers will surpass what cells do, making possible atom-by-atom desktop manufacturing. “Although this result will require many years of research and development, no physical or economic obstacle blocks its achievement,” he says. “The resulting advances seem well above the curve that Dr Huebner projects.”

At the Acceleration Studies Foundation, a non-profit think tank in San Pedro, California, John Smart examines why technological change is progressing so fast. Looking at the growth of nanotechnology and artificial intelligence, Smart agrees with Kurzweil that we are rocketing toward a technological “singularity” – a point sometime between 2040 and 2080 where change is so blindingly fast that we just can’t predict where it will go.

Smart also accepts Huebner’s findings, but with a reservation. Innovation may seem to be slowing even as its real pace accelerates, he says, because it’s slipping from human hands and so fading from human view. More and more, he says, progress takes place “under the hood” in the form of abstract computing processes. Huebner’s analysis misses this entirely.

Take a modern car. “Think of the amount of computation – design, supply chain and process automation – that went into building it,” Smart says. “Computations have become so incremental and abstract that we no longer see them as innovations. People are heading for a comfortable cocoon where the machines are doing the work and the innovating,” he says. “But we’re not measuring that very well.”

Huebner disagrees. “It doesn’t matter if it is humans or machines that are the source of innovation. If it isn’t noticeable to the people who chronicle technological history then it is probably a minor event.”

A middle path between Huebner’s warning of an imminent end to tech progress, and Kurzweil and Smart’s equally imminent encounter with a silicon singularity, has been staked out by Ted Modis, a Swiss physicist and futurologist.

Modis agrees with Huebner that an exponential rate of change cannot be sustained and his findings, like Huebner’s, suggest that technological change will not increase forever. But rather than expecting innovation to plummet, Modis foresees a long, slow decline that mirrors technology’s climb.

At the peak

“I see the world being presently at the peak of its rate of change and that there is ahead of us as much change as there is behind us,” Modis says. “I don’t subscribe to the continually exponential rate of growth, nor to an imminent drying up of innovation.”

So who is right? The high-tech gurus who predict exponentially increasing change up to and through a blinding event horizon? Huebner, who foresees a looming collision with technology’s limits? Or Modis, who expects a long, slow decline?

The impasse has parallels with cosmology during much of the 20th century, when theorists debated endlessly whether the universe would keep expanding, creep toward a steady state, or collapse. It took new and better measurements to break the log jam, leading to the surprising discovery that the rate of expansion is actually accelerating.

Perhaps it is significant that all the mutually exclusive techno-projections focus on exponential technological growth. Innovation theorist Ilkka Tuomi at the Institute for Prospective Technological Studies in Seville, Spain, says: “Exponential growth is very uncommon in the real world. It usually ends when it starts to matter.” And it looks like it is starting to matter.

Terrorist attack in London

Saturday, July 09, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/terrorist-attack-in-london.html>

The terrible terrorist bombings in London have killed at least 50 people with hundreds injured. It seems doubtless now that the attack was perpetrated by Islamic fundamentalists – coinciding with the beginning of the G8 talks.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7642&feedId=online-news_rss20

London rush hour blasts kill 50

- 14:07 08 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Will Knight

At least 50 people have been confirmed dead following explosions that tore through three London Underground trains and a double-decker bus on Thursday 7 July.

Emergency workers and hospital staff responded quickly and efficiently to the blasts, which struck several points on London's hectic travel system within the space of an hour. But the co-ordinated attacks injured over 700 people and 22 were still in a critical condition in hospital on Friday.

The first bomb exploded at 0851 BST, aboard a Circle line tube train travelling from Aldgate East to Liverpool Street. Moments later, at 0856 BST, a second explosion tore through a Piccadilly line train travelling deep beneath the ground between Kings Cross and Russell Square. At 0917 BST, another device exploded on a train at Edgware Road in west London. And

finally, at 0947 BST, a fourth bomb ripped apart a double-decker bus close to Tavistock Square, in central London.

Massive investigation

Police and intelligence agencies launched a massive investigation into the attacks, combing through the scene of each explosion and studying CCTV footage for clues as to who may have carried out the killings.

Speaking at a press conference held in London on Friday, head of the UK's anti-terrorist squad Andy Hayman said that each blast was caused by around 4.5 kilograms of explosives. He said devices were apparently placed on the floor of each train and on the floor or the seat of the targeted bus.

But Hayman said the investigation would be affected by the fact that bodies were still being recovered from the tunnel between Kings Cross and Russell Square. "There is a risk of the tunnel being unsafe," he said. "It would be wholly unwise and could inhibit a successful prosecution if we rushed this stage."

Suicide bombers

Eye witness accounts have led to media speculation that the attack on the double-decker was carried out by a suicide bomber. However, the head of London's police force, Ian Blair, said there was "absolutely nothing to suggest this was a suicide bomb". But he added that: "There is nothing to rule it out. It may have been that or it may have been a bomb left on a seat."

On the day of the attacks, a previously unknown Islamic terrorist group, calling itself the Group of al-Qaeda of Jihad Organisation in Europe posted a statement to a website claiming responsibility. UK home secretary Charles Clarke said the claim had not been verified but was being taken seriously.

Clarke also defended the recent decision to downgrade the terror threat in London, but admitted that intelligence had failed to gather any warning of an imminent strike.

“It certainly was a failure of intelligence in the sense that we didn’t know this was coming,” he said. “But by definition when you’re looking for needles in haystacks you can miss the needles and the tragedy of yesterday is that we did miss the needles.”

Rubbery photo longevity ratings

Saturday, July 09, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/rubbery-photo-longevity-ratings.html>

As consumers are increasingly using inkjet printers to print out their photos, the question of the “longevity” of the image has come into play. Will my photo look as good as it does in 10 years time?

Although there are no real standards, the Wilhelm testing methods have become a somewhat “de facto” method. Apparently, for some high end HP and Epson ink/paper combinations, prints will stay reasonable for around a century. That isn’t too bad. More recently, however, Kodak and a number of smaller third parties have announced “archival” quality paper as well – and the evidence for their longevity is somewhat questionable.

Personally, I only use inkjet prints for testing purposes. For demonstration and display prints, I take my digital images to a good quality photo lab and I prefer the FujiColour process onto archival paper. In any case, the value of digital photography is that the original “negative” (i.e., the digital image) NEVER fades!

Source article

<http://www.pcworld.com/resource/article/0,aid,121752,pg,1,RSS,RSS,00.asp>

Lack of Standards Sparks Inkjet Photo Fade Debate

- Tom Spring, PC World
- Friday, July 08, 2005

How long can you expect your inkjet-printed photos to last? More and more photo inkjet papers are being touted as “fade resistant” and “archival safe,” but experts say these marketing pitches don’t always provide good information on how long it will take for skin tones to turn green and paper to yellow on precious family photos.

Because there’s no standard for measuring inkjet print longevity, it’s difficult for consumers to make apples-to-apples comparisons of photo papers. Consequently, experts say, people may find that some photos expected to last for decades will start to fade in just a few years.

“How long a photo printed with an inkjet printer will last depends on who you ask,” says Cathy Martin, an analyst for InfoTrends. She says there are no clear answers for consumers looking for the best, and longest-lasting, photo inkjet paper. Photo paper is considered one of the crucial archival elements for photographs.

The fade debate is growing louder as companies like International Paper, Eastman Kodak, and Staples have begun more heavily marketing their photo inkjet paper for use with printers made by manufacturers like Canon, Seiko-Epson, Hewlett-Packard, and Lexmark.

Claims and Counterclaims

The latest salvo in the longstanding debate comes from HP and Epson; the companies dismiss claims by third-party paper vendors such as International Paper, Kodak, and Staples that their papers will produce archival-quality prints on any inkjet printer.

Specifically, Epson and HP strongly dispute Kodak’s claim that prints made on their printers with Kodak’s special paper will last 120 years before fading.

Similarly, the printer vendors dispute International Paper's claims that prints made on the company's recently introduced National Geographic Premium Paper High Gloss will last "more than 100 years." (Staples, while claiming that photos printed on its papers "resist fading," makes no specific claims as to how many years a photo printed on its paper will last before showing signs of fading.)

"We've heard a lot of promises from our competitors," says Nils Miller, HP's ink and media senior scientist. But so far he says he hasn't seen a "miracle paper" from a third-party supplier that can deliver the same print longevity and quality with all printers.

Epson says users of its paper, in combination with Epson premium inks, can expect images to last up to 104 years before showing signs of fading. HP says its premium inks used with HP photo paper will last 115 years. These claims are based on internal testing by Epson and HP and on tests by Wilhelm Imaging Research, an independent laboratory based in Grinnell, Iowa.

Testing Issues

At the heart of the inkjet photo paper debate are conflicting opinions on how best to test printed photographs in order to project how long an image will last before it begins to fade.

For years, under the auspices of the International Standards Organization (ISO), printer makers and third-party providers of digital imaging products have been trying to settle on a mutually agreeable way to predict image longevity. But with no standard in sight, Wilhelm Imaging Research earlier this year announced that it would begin certifying digital imaging products for print longevity in order to assist consumers in making buying decisions. Wilhelm ratings, which will project print longevity for specific printer and paper combinations, are expected to begin appearing on product packages sometime this summer.

Major printer vendors regularly hire WIR, which is run by print longevity expert Henry Wilhelm, to test photo papers, inks, and printers for longevity. (Full disclosure: PC World has never hired or paid Wilhelm, but he has supplied test results for some of our articles about print longevity.) Rob Rosson, an imaging supplies analyst for Current Analysis, says WIR testing methodology has become the industry's de facto standard.

WIR has also tested Kodak and Staples papers, and Wilhelm's print longevity projections for those products fall far short of those achieved by HP and Epson papers. For example, WIR projects that images printed with Kodak photo paper using HP Photosmart 145 and 245 printers will last only 11 years—or 109 fewer years than Kodak is claiming.

In 2002 WIR tested Staples Premium Glossy Ink Jet Photo paper and rated the print life at 1 to 3 years with most printers. Since then, Staples points out, it uses a more advanced paper technology. Longevity for National Geographic Premium Paper High Gloss are not yet available from WIR.

However, some third-party photo paper vendors aren't buying into WIR's testing as a de facto standard. Critics say WIR testing is not only time-consuming but costly: Companies that wish to participate in the WIR seal of longevity program must ante up \$15,000 for testing one type of paper with one specific printer and ink. Vendors also contend that WIR tests don't reflect how prints will fare in a real-world display environment.

Testing Differences

All labs, including WIR, project image longevity based on tests involving exposure to light, heat, humidity and air pollution. And all labs use a procedure called accelerated fading to test for resistance to light exposure. Basically, accelerated fading involves exposing images to intense light and using mathematical formulas on the results in order to project when the picture might degrade to an unacceptable level.

But WIR and others don't see eye to eye on how to test for light fading. Kodak, for example, says its tests assume the room where the photos will be displayed is much darker than the brightly lit room on which WIR tests are predicated. Kodak and Staples say WIR's methodology places too much weight on fading due to exposure to light. They argue that WIR doesn't sufficiently factor in the importance of an image's resistance to heat, humidity, and ozone pollutants.

Wilhelm counters that Kodak's tests aren't sufficiently stringent, and that Staples has provided no scientific data whatsoever to back its claim that its photo paper is "fade resistant." In general, Wilhelm says, consumers should be wary of vendor claims that aren't explained in detail or supported by independent testing.

"If every manufacturer was responsible for making their own longevity claims, those claims would mean nothing," he says. Third-party inkjet paper suppliers counter that, if an international standard existed, they would gladly base their claims on that standard.

"It's an industry-wide problem we did not create," says Tim Whelan, director of marketing for coated digital papers at International Paper. Whelan says International Paper has made a significant investment in testing its paper for quality and longevity.

Packaging for International Paper's National Geographic Premium Paper High Gloss states that the projected 100-plus years of print longevity applies to images displayed "under glass with the latest photo inkjets."

But International Paper officials say the claim only applies to prints made using the HP 8700 series printer and HP Vivera inks. The claim is based on the company's own testing. International Paper says more comprehensive testing of its paper with a larger selection of printers is in the works.

“Longevity is not the most important reason our customers buy Staples’ photo paper,” says Jevin Eagle, senior vice president of Staples brand group. He says the quality of the image, how quickly the image dries after printing, and price are what Staples customers value in its brand-name inkjet photo paper. Eagle wouldn’t comment on Staples’ “fade resistant” claim or the testing processes it bases the claim on.

But “Marketing claims are extremely confusing for customers to untangle,” he adds. “Until there is one unbiased standard for testing, we plan to keep things very simple for our customers.” Staples offers a money-back guarantee on its photo inkjet paper if consumers are not satisfied.

More Claims

Some vendors toss around terms like “archival quality” without making any promises regarding image permanence.

For example, Paris Business Products touts its Glossy Ultra Premium Photo paper as “Acid-free archival paper for long lasting prints” on product packaging.

Sharon Hennelly, Paris Business Products spokesperson, explained that the “archival” claim refers primarily to the fact that the paper is acid-free. Acid-free paper lasts longer than other papers and holds color well, she said. Paris Business Products makes no claim as to how long the image will maintain its color vitality before noticeable fading occurs.

Ultimately, the best way to extend the life of your images is to keep them in a photo album or even a shoe box. Displayed on walls, images are affected by light and air pollutants. And it’s best to keep digital copies of pictures on a CD or DVD, says InfoTrends’ Martin.

“Consumers can’t put all the responsibility on preserving images on the photo paper,” says Dan Burge, a scientist with the Image Permanence Institute.

“It’s up to the consumer to take good care of their images if they want them to last,” Burge says.

Sasser Worm creator sentenced

Saturday, July 09, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/sasser-worm-creator-sentenced.html>

Sven Jaschan, the young creator of the incredibly damaging Sasser worm has been sentenced in a German court. All things considered, I personally think that he got off fairly lightly with his suspended sentence and community service.

Source article

<http://www.pcworld.com/resource/article/0,aid,121749,pg,1,RSS,RSS,00.asp>

Sasser Worm Creator Sentenced

- Peter Sayer, IDG News Service
- Friday, July 08, 2005

A German teenager who confessed to creating the Sasser computer worm has been found guilty of three counts of computer sabotage and four counts of data manipulation, and given a suspended sentence of 21 months.

Sven Jaschan, 19, was sentenced at the district court in Verden, Germany, on Friday, according to a statement from the court.

On Probation

Jaschan will be released on three years' probation. If he commits another crime during the probation period, he will be jailed at a juvenile detention center to serve the 21-month sentence.

In addition, Jaschan must perform 30 hours of community service in a home for the elderly or a hospital.

Jaschan confessed to writing the Sasser worm after he was arrested in May 2004.

Sasser crashed hundreds thousands of computers around the world last year by exploiting a flaw in a Windows software component called the Local Security Authority Subsystem Service, or LSASS.

The question of open and unprotected Wi-Fi networks

Saturday, July 09, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/question-of-open-and-unprotected-wi-fi.html>

A Florida man has been charged with a felony after using an unprotected wi-fi network (without permission). Although it is relatively clear in this case, it brings up a number of interesting questions. Firstly, a wi-fi network by its very nature does not conform to set boundaries. My wi-fi network coverage will “leak” into public space.

Now, given that a network is on public space and without any sort of encryption or protection (i.e., an open network), I personally find it questionable that anyone using such a network can or should be charged with a crime essentially amounting to “digital trespass”.

I feel that there is an onus on the owner of the network to at least put up some form of protection to their network. Any deliberate intrusion then has clear intent.

Source article

<http://www.pcworld.com/resource/article/0,aid,121747,pg,1,RSS,RSS,00.asp>

Man Arrested for Accessing Wi-Fi Network

- Stephen Lawson, IDG News Service
- Friday, July 08, 2005

A man who allegedly accessed a home Wi-Fi network in St. Petersburg, Florida, from a parked car got logged off the hard way: He was arrested and charged with a felony.

Benjamin Smith III, 40, was arrested on April 21 outside the St. Petersburg home of Richard Dinon and charged under a Florida law that prohibits unauthorized access to a computer or network, says George Kajtsa, the police department's public information officer. A pre-trial hearing in the case is scheduled for Monday, according to the state attorney's office for Pasco and Pinellas counties.

Dinon saw Smith sitting in a parked sport-utility vehicle in front of his house and wondered what he was doing there, then saw he was using a notebook computer, Kajtsa says.

"What made him suspicious was, every time he looked toward the car, the guy closed the lid on his laptop," Kajtsa says. Dinon called police. When they came to the scene and approached the vehicle, Smith closed the computer again. The police asked him what he was doing and he finally owned up to it, Kajtsa says. Smith was arrested and the PC seized and sent to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement as potential evidence.

Dinon was worried that Smith might be doing something illegal or inappropriate, Kajtsa says.

"What he was concerned about was not so much that the guy was accessing his [network], what he was concerned about was what he was accessing," Kajtsa says. Dinon was afraid he might be linked to whatever Smith was doing because it was his LAN being used, he says. "This guy did not want himself to be identified as accessing porn sites or child pornography."

Little-Used Law

The state law under which Smith was charged prohibits accessing a computer or network knowingly, wilfully, and without authorization. Kajtsa says it's the first time anyone has been arrested in St. Petersburg for using someone else's Wi-Fi.

“This is a very little-used statute,” Kajtsa says.

Gartner analyst Ken Dulaney has no sympathy for Wi-Fi users such as Dinon.

“He should have put security on his wireless LAN system. It's the guy's fault that he left it open,” Dulaney says. “Don't the police have anything better to do?”

Open wireless LANs are still common in many residential areas even though Wi-Fi routers can be set not to broadcast their names and tools for encryption have improved since the early days of the technology. Dulaney estimated that half of all wireless LANs are completely open to unauthorized users.

Jeb Bush drops persecution of Michael Schiavo

Saturday, July 09, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/jeb-bush-drops-persecution-of-michael.html>



Governor Jeb Bush

Governor Jeb Bush, the fundamentalist loon who tried to send state troopers to “rescue” Terri Schiavo from her hospice has finally dropped his quite offensive pursuit of Michael Schiavo. Bush had tried to suggest that there was some sort of time delay from Michael Schiavo finding his collapsed wife and him calling for emergency services. This

was based entirely on the fact that Schiavo could not correctly remember the exact time of when he found his wife collapsed.

State Attorney Bernie McCabe however reported to Bush,

“...that there were explanations ‘far more likely and logical than any involving criminal wrongdoing’ surrounding Schiavo’s collapse.”

Basically, that’s a polite way of saying, “stop being a moron”.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/nm/20050708/pl_nm/rights_schiavo_dc

Governor Bush gives up pursuit of Schiavo case

By Michael Peltier Fri Jul 8, 3:09 PM ET

Jeb Bush has dropped his pursuit of an investigation into the 1990 collapse of Terri Schiavo after a prosecutor said there was no indication of foul play that led to her irrevocable brain damage.

Bush, who worked hard to keep Schiavo on a feeding tube before her March 31 death, had ordered the probe after an autopsy confirmed she had been in the persistent vegetative state.

Gov. Bush, brother of President Bush and a devout Catholic convert, said there were indications of a 40- to 70-minute gap between the time Michael Schiavo discovered his wife after she collapsed 15 years ago and the time he called for medical assistance.

But Pinellas County State Attorney Bernie McCabe, who conducted the probe, wrote Bush on June 30 that there were explanations “far more likely and logical than any involving criminal wrongdoing” surrounding Schiavo’s collapse.

In a reply to McCabe dated July 7, Bush said he would stop the investigation. “Based on your conclusions, I will follow your recommendation that the inquiry by the state be closed,” Bush wrote. The letter was distributed on Friday.

Schiavo died of dehydration 13 days after her feeding tube was removed. She was 41.

Her death came after years of legal battles between Michael Schiavo and her parents, Bob and Mary Schindler, over whether to remove the sustenance that was keeping her alive.

The Schindlers' cause was joined by the Vatican and by conservative U.S. politicians, anti-abortion campaigners and pro-life groups.

The autopsy conducted after Schiavo's death did not find what caused her heart to stop and starve her brain of oxygen. At the time of her death, her brain was half the size of a normal brain.

McCabe based his recommendations to Gov. Bush on a report by investigators that found that there was no indication of culpability and that Michael Schiavo's actions following her collapse appeared consistent with a distraught spouse trying to save his wife's life.

"Without proof of criminal agency, there can be no hope of prosecution," the investigators concluded.

Promising new HIV drug

Sunday, July 10, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/promising-new-hiv-drug.html>

Japanese researchers have developed a new drug that blocks HIV from entering human cells. According to a rather small report in ScienceDaily, it appears to have been quite promising in a small clinical trial of 40 patients. Of interest, viral load was significantly reduced and the drug caused minimal side-effects.

Source article:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/upi/index.php?feed=Science&article=UPI-1-20050706-05305900-bc-japan-newdrug.xml>

Japanese scientists introduce new HIV drug

KOBE, Japan, July 6 (UPI) – Japanese researchers have developed a durable new drug that blocks HIV from entering human cells and causes almost no side effects.

The new drug, code named AK602, was unveiled by Hiroaki Mitsuya, leader of the research team at Kumamoto University, at the International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Kobe Tuesday, the Asahi Shimbun reported Wednesday.

The drug's main feature is that it shuts out the AIDS virus at the point when it tries to intrude into a human cell.

Current AIDS medications often lose their effectiveness after a few days due to the virus' resistance, but the AK602 reacts to human cells instead of attacking the virus, said Mitsuya, a university professor.

When the new drug becomes attached to the protein that acts as an entrance into human cells for the AIDS virus, it can prevent HIV from entering.

The researchers conducted clinical tests on 40 AIDS patients in the United States. When the patients took 0.02 ounces of AK602 twice a day for 10 days, the number of HIV viruses dropped to an average of 1 percent.

Almost no side effects were reported, the professor said.

The great swindle of our genetic code

Sunday, July 10, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/great-swindle-of-our-genetic-code.html>

The BRCA2 gene confers a significant increase risk of breast cancer to those women unfortunate enough to have it. A number of laboratories around the world have been able to provide a test to screen for this gene. However, an American biotech firm “Myriad Genetics” tried and now has successfully been granted a patent on this gene.

What is the significance? The test for the BRCA2 gene can now only be performed at their laboratory!

I find this trend disturbing and highly worrying. The BRCA2 gene is not a synthetic gene to create a novel protein. It is simply a natural gene present in some people. I fail to see how a patent can be awarded to anyone for basically a natural discovery.

Source article

<http://www.the-scientist.com/news/20050701/01>

BRCA2 patent upheld

By Grit Kienzlen

The European Patent Office (EPO) this week upheld a patent owned by Utah-based biotech firm Myriad Genetics for breast cancer susceptibility testing related to a particular BRCA2 mutation, despite opposition from geneticists who said the patent discriminated against Ashkenazi Jews.

Myriad's patent EP 785216 originally included much wider diagnostic applications, but in advance of the hearings this month had rewritten the original claims to focus on identification of one particular mutation—6974delT—“for diagnosing a predisposition to breast cancer in Ashkenazi Jewish women.”

One in 100 Ashkenazi Jewish women carries the mutation which predisposes her to breast cancer and confers a 65% to 70% chance of developing the disease, according to the European Society of Human Genetics. A statement from the society said this was the first time that a racial or ethnic group has been specifically singled out as a diagnostic target in this way.

Geneticists from 18 national societies, including Gert Matthijs of the Belgian Society of Human Genetics, had opposed the patent ahead of the hearing on the grounds that it would prevent them from conducting genetic screening women they knew to be Ashkenazi Jews, unless they had a license with the US firm.

The European Society of Human Genetics also said it was strongly opposed to the selection of a particular group as a diagnostic target in a gene patent claim. “What it means in practice is that genetic centers that do not have licenses for this test—or where the healthcare systems cannot afford to pay for it—may be forced to deny it to Ashkenazi Jewish women,” said Gert-Jan van Ommen, from Leiden University Medical Center, the Netherlands, in the statement.

On Thursday, the day after a panel of three experts at EPO upheld the patent, Matthijs told *The Scientist*, “I am disappointed.” But the decision can still be challenged again, he added, and “we may still give this a try.”

Matthijs, from the department of human genetics, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium, said in a statement that the society still believes that “there is something fundamentally wrong if one ethnic group can be singled out by patenting.”

According to Matthijs, “Women coming to be tested for breast cancer will have to be asked whether they are Ashkenazi Jewish or not. If they are, the healthcare providers will only be able to offer the test if they paid for a license, or they will have to send the women’s samples abroad. Women who are not Ashkenazi Jewish—or who just don’t know that they have Ashkenazi Jewish ancestors—will be entitled to a test which is free. This is the first time that this kind of situation has arisen in genetic testing, and we find it very worrying.”

Jochen Decker, medical director at the German company Bioscientia, said that it does make sense to ask women for their ethnic origin in breast cancer testing. Bioscientia is one of Myriad’s very few licensees. “It is very well known that certain genetic mutations are over-proportionally frequent in this population,” Decker says, meaning that physicians should take care to test for them if a woman says she is Ashkenazi.

The fight between Myriad and the European geneticists is mostly about data. By creating a monopoly for performing breast cancer screening, the firm now has access to large data sets from thousands of woman, including their medical histories. This allows them to offer very good diagnosis indeed. “In my mind, Myriad has a performance monopoly,” Decker said. He offers his patients a test that is partly undertaken by Myriad, for a fee of €3800.

Similar tests done by a consortium of a dozen universities in Germany cost around €1800. But as the data sets to compare with are much smaller, the tests occasionally display gene variants that cannot be assigned a disease risk. “We consider cooperation with Bioscientia in these cases,” Norbert

Arnold, director of the oncology laboratory in the Women's Hospital of the University of Kiel, told The Scientist.

New quick finger test for osteoporosis

Monday, July 11, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/new-quick-finger-test-for-osteoporosis.html>

Research performed at the University of Limerick has revealed a new quick test that may be useful at determining whether someone has osteoporosis.

In essence, the test looks at the number of disulphide bonds in the fingernails. A low level in the nails correlates with low levels in the bone which can indicate the presence of osteoporosis.

If this test is accurate, it may well replace the relatively involved procedure of a bone scan for many people.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4663287.stm>

Fingernail test for bone disease

Scientists have devised a way of testing for the bone disease osteoporosis simply by scanning a patient's fingernail.

Both fingernails and bones contain a crucial bonding substance which helps give them strength.

The team, including University of Limerick experts, say low levels in the fingernail indicate low levels in bone.

Their test, they say, offers a cheap and accessible way of assessing if someone needs to go for further checks.

The idea has been nominated for the Medical Futures – Innovation Awards, due to be announced later this year.

Floppy nails

Osteoporosis is a weakening of the bones that can lead to breaks which are difficult to heal.

It affects one in three women and one in 12 men and is responsible for 200,000 broken bones per year in the UK – and 40 deaths a day.

The first clue the fingernail could play a role in diagnosing the disease came when a doctor noticed his osteoporosis patients had floppy nails.

Mark Towler, a lecturer in materials at the University of Limerick was asked to look at the properties of nail and bone.

Dr Towler checked the nails and bones in 10 people with osteoporosis and 10 without.

He found that levels of disulphide bond – needed to bind one protein molecule to another – were lower in people with osteoporosis.

In nails, the disulphide bond is needed to bind keratin – which gives them strength.

For bones, the protein collagen needs disulphide bonds to stick together.

Assessment

The researchers went on to look at another 200 people, who were also given bone scans – the conventional way of assessing if someone has a risk of osteoporosis.

Everyone shown by the scans to have osteoporosis was also found to have low levels of disulphide bond.

Dr Towler said: “People are usually referred to hospital for bone scans if their doctors feel they have risk factors, such as being post menopausal, or if they smoke.

“This test could be low cost and simple way of assessing someone’s risk and if they need to go for further checks.

“It could be done in a GP surgery, or someone could send off a nail for testing.”

The researchers are now seeking funding to carry on their research so they can evaluate what level of disulphide bond indicates that someone is at risk of osteoporosis, or that they already have the disease.

A spokeswoman for the National Osteoporosis Society said it was an interesting area of research.

She added: “Obviously, there’s still quite a lot of work to do, to work out the link between nail and bone health.

“There’s interesting work that we’re hearing about now, aimed at assessing risk.

“Anything that can help doctors find an easy way of doing that is always welcome.”

Viagra may cause blindness

Monday, July 11, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/viagra-may-cause-blindness.html>

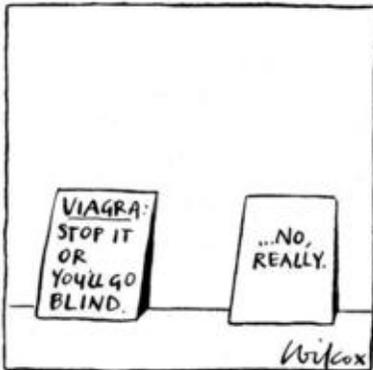


Illustration: *Cathy Wilcox*

Although it almost sounds like a joke, sildenafil (Viagra) as well as the other long acting impotence drugs have been associated with non-arteritic anterior ischaemic optic neuropathy (NAION) – which can cause sudden (non-reversible) blindness.

It isn't actually very clear whether these drugs are causative or not and Pfizer denies that sildenafil is involved.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/bitter-clich233-in-sight-for-viagra-users/2005/07/10/1120934128887.html>

Bitter cliché in sight for Viagra users

July 11, 2005

Viagra and two other popular impotence drugs may cause sudden blindness in one eye in rare cases, the US Food and Drug Administration has warned.

The condition, called non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION) is caused by a blockage of blood to the optic nerve. Men who were older than 50, those who smoked or those with high blood pressure, heart disease or high cholesterol were at greater risk of the condition, the administration said.

The administration said it had received 43 reports of the condition in men who had recently taken Viagra, Cialis or Levitra. The vision loss is generally not reversible.

Pfizer, which makes Viagra, has said it does not believe its drug is causing the sudden blindness.

“There is no evidence that Viagra causes blindness or any other serious ocular condition,” said Joseph Feczko, the company’s chief medical officer. “Men taking Viagra are at no greater risk for blindness – including vision loss from NAION – than men of similar age and health not taking the medicine.”

But the administration’s recent announcement on the subject offered a different perspective. It said it was “not possible to determine whether these oral medicines for erectile dysfunction were the cause of the loss of eyesight or whether the problem is related to other factors such as high blood pressure or diabetes, or to a combination of these problems”.

The Washington Post

Controversy over the planned West Bank barrier

Tuesday, July 12, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/controversy-over-planned-west-bank.html>

The Israeli government is planning on building a barrier across the West Bank with the aim of stopping suicide bombers. However, their plan will involve building across the occupied territories and will almost certainly further restrict the freedoms of the Palestinian people in the West Bank further.

There is no question with the legality of the situation. The World Court has ruled that such a project is illegal. Unfortunately, the oppression of the Palestinian people is something that falls somewhat on deaf ears in the Western world, particularly to the United States.

I have just recently read Michael Moore's book "Stupid White Men". Although his treatise on how the Israeli-Palestinian situation could be resolved is simplistic and frankly idiotic, there are some gleams of wisdom amongst the chaff. The US (and other Western Nations) needs to take a stronger line against Israel for its treatment of the Palestinian people. For Israel to claim that it is a democracy is somewhat of a farce. Although comparisons to apartheid may be somewhat extreme, there nevertheless are fundamental systemic and institutionalised differences to how people who live in "Israel"

are treated depending on race. The US gives huge amounts of foreign aid to Israel. It should demand (at least) that actions that contravene international law should not be performed.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4674075.stm

Sanction call over Israel barrier

The Palestinian Authority has urged global action against firms which supply Israel with products to build its controversial West Bank barrier.

Foreign Minister Nasser al-Kidwa said he would ask the UN to punish anyone contributing to building the barrier.

In an interview with Reuters news agency, he said the US firm, Caterpillar, was supplying earth-moving machinery to the Israeli army.

Caterpillar says all sales to Israel comply with US law.

The Israeli barrier has been ruled illegal by the UN's World Court, because it is being built on occupied territory.

Israel says the barrier, made of concrete walls and razor-wire fences, is a legitimate way to stop suicide bombers.

'Illegal activities'

"We want to see some concrete measures," Mr Kidwa said.

"We are proposing completely punitive measures against entities, companies and individuals that contribute to the construction of the wall and other illegal activities in the occupied Palestinian territory."

Mr Kidwa said such measures could include undertakings by the UN member state not to issue visas or work contracts to firms linked with the barrier.

Palestinians and the UN say the barrier causes great hardship to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians across the West Bank, cutting them off from hospitals, schools and jobs.

Israel has occupied the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since 1967.

Improved vitamin controls in Europe

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/improved-vitamin-controls-in-europe.html>

The European Court has tightened legislation on the sale of vitamins and minerals. I personally welcome such a development. For too long, the manufacturers and proponents of vitamins and minerals and other “natural” products have enjoyed a legislative void which they justify with a “natural = safe = healthy” delusion.

Quite simply, something that is invariably safe means that it is ineffective. In addition, something that is effective (i.e., has significant physiological effects), will not be safe or appropriate at all doses.

I have no issues with people using “food” for health, but health supplements that come in pills and tablets are NOT food. IMHO, they should undergo the same vigorous laws that govern medications.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4670971.stm>

Vitamin controls backed by Europe

The European Court has decided to tighten rules on the sale of vitamins and minerals.

The proposals will ban around 200 supplements from sale and put restrictions on the upper limits of vitamin doses.

Some health experts wanted to see vitamins and minerals controlled in the same way as conventional medicines.

But critics argued the new rules were unnecessarily restrictive, and would deny consumers choice.

Under the EU Food Supplements Directive, due to come into effect in August, supplements will only be able to include vitamins and minerals taken from an approved list.

However, manufacturers of products already on the market will have until the end of December 2009 to change any of the banned ingredients to ensure that their product can continue to be sold in the future.

Also, the ban on non-listed supplements will not apply at all to vitamins and minerals normally found in or consumed as part of the diet, which the Alliance for Natural Health (ANH) welcomed.

‘Too restrictive’

The ban had been challenged by the Alliance for Natural Health (ANH), the Health Food Manufacturers’ Association (HFMA) and the National Association of Health Stores (NAHS).

They argued the legislation would be too restrictive, and would threaten thousands of perfectly safe products.

The directive was first approved by EU governments in 2002 and was designed to tighten controls on the growing market in products sold under the health food heading – natural remedies, vitamin supplements and mineral plant extracts.

The HFMA and the ANH argued the directive was an unlawful restriction on freedom to trade, that implementation would impose an unnecessary burden on British business and there are no reasons to believe it is necessary to protect consumers' welfare.

After reviewing the evidence presented by both sides, European Court of Justice Advocate General Leendert Geelhoed said in April that the directive infringed legal guidelines in his opinion.

Mixed reaction

However, the court pointed out that certain restrictions could be justified by the protection of public health and considered the measures in question to be necessary and appropriate for the purpose of achieving that objective.

The British Dietetic Association backed the new plans.

It is concerned about patients admitted to hospital suffering liver failure and severe stomach problems after taking high doses of vitamins.

It said in some cases the supplements are preventing people getting the correct treatment for other chronic illness.

Spokeswoman Ursula Arens said consumers should not be greatly affected by the changes.

“About 99% of products will not be affected.”

The ruling was also welcomed by Sue Davies, of the consumer magazine Which?.

She said: “It will ensure that products are safe, that they contain forms of vitamins and minerals that offer some benefit, and that they are clearly labelled.”

Peter Aldiss, managing director of Holland and Barrett, said he was very disappointed by the decision.

“There are hundreds of nutrients which are already very safely on sale with very strict laws in the UK.

“This directive purely just takes those nutrients out of the reckoning – they’re perfectly safe and they’ve been on sale for decades.”

David Adams, director of HFMA, said the Prime Minister, who currently holds the EU Presidency, should get the legislation rewritten to allow the UK to include products on the market which would otherwise lie outside the list – a call echoed by the Conservative Party.

The ANH said its lawyers had interpreted the directive’s restrictions to apply only to minerals and vitamins from synthetic sources.

Public Health Minister Caroline Flint, said government was concerned that some of the provisions in the Directive could be “unduly burdensome”, particularly for small companies making these products.

“We have provided resources to help industry and small businesses supply the evidence necessary to allow their products to continue to stay on the market for the time being. This doesn’t require them to do any new testing or provide new data at this stage.

“The directive will also set maximum levels of vitamins and minerals in food supplements. We believe that any maximum dosage level should be based on

scientific evidence. We will work with other member states and the European Commission on this basis.”

It will be possible to add products to the approved list and none will be removed unless they are proved to be unsafe.

New Harry Potter book accidentally sold early

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/new-harry-potter-book-accidentally.html>

Some lucky Canadians managed to get they copy of the new J. K. Rowling book “Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince” early when a store accidentally sold it to them. What I found surprising was that the publisher actually got a Supreme Court judge order that these few lucky people had to keep the contents of the book secret. In my mind, that is unnecessarily high handed.

I have only recently finished reading all previous five Harry Potter books and am eagerly awaiting the next one. Although the books are not particularly well written, the story line, plot development and themes are fantastic.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/ap/20050712/ap_on_en_ot/harry_potter_early_sale

Harry Potter Books Sold by Accident

Tue Jul 12, 2:55 PM ET

COQUITLAM, British Columbia – A handful of people in Canada got a sneak peak of the latest Harry Potter book, but a British Columbia Supreme Court judge ordered them to keep it a secret.

The book was sold to 14 people who snagged a copy of J.K. Rowlings' much anticipated "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," when it landed on shelves last Thursday at a local grocery store.

The book, officially set for release this coming Saturday, has been shrouded in secrecy and its debut has been highly orchestrated to enable everyone — readers, reviewers, even publishers — to crack it open all at once. It's the sixth in Rowling's seven-book fantasy series on the young wizard.

But the store slipped up and sold 14 copies before realizing its mistake.

"It was an inadvertent error on behalf of one of our staff," said Geoff Wilson, a spokesman for the Real Canadian Superstore. He said the books were quickly removed.

Justice Kristi Gill last Saturday ordered customers not to talk about the book, copy it, sell it or even read it before it is officially released at 12:01 a.m. July 16.

The order also compels them to return the novel to the publisher, Raincoast Book Distribution Ltd., until the official release. At that time it will be returned to them.

As an added incentive, Raincoast will include Rowling's autograph and a gift pack.

Religion can be used to explain anything...

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/religion-can-be-used-to-explain.html>

A rather funny though insightful opinion piece was published in the Sydney Morning Herald recently to which I mostly agree. The problem with religiosity is that you choose what you want to see and then apply a sense of divine righteousness to it. As such, anything you want to believe can be “sanctioned by God”. This is ultimately dangerous as well can see with the militant Islamic fundamentalist movements grabbing headlines at the moment. Unfortunately, most other religions choose to believe that “this cannot happen to me” approach rather than analysing why such a thing could happen in the first instance.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/heckler/religion-use-it-to-justify-anything-even-big-brother/2005/07/12/1120934245081.html>

Religion: use it to justify anything, even Big Brother

July 13, 2005

It's salvation in the lounge room, writes Tim Wallace.

A Christian parable, says the boss of the television station that owns the Big Brother franchise in Britain. A modern embodiment of biblical values, even. “Look beyond the shouting and the swearing to the people themselves,” Channel 4 chief Andy Duncan apparently preached to a room of Christians recently. “There are positive values, transformatory experiences and examples of personal growth.”

Such things, of course, might be found in a Bali prison or a Port Hedland detention centre (both hotbeds of Christian conversion, apparently) but it does not follow that they should be described as instruments of God's grace.

Duncan himself confesses (if that be the right word) to being a born-again Christian, so one might only guess at the self-serving justification he would make of his tawdry money-spinner were he not.

“Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental New Testament values – can only be built on knowledge and respect. Condemnation so often springs from ignorance and fear,” he mouthed piously. He might just as easily put it another way.

“Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental Koran values – can only be built on knowledge and respect.”

“Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental Buddhist values – can only be built on knowledge and respect.”

“Tolerance and understanding of others – fundamental secular humanist values – can only ...” etc.

Hey, anyone can play this game. That's the problem with semi-organised religion: no quality control. It's easier to be born again than to get a driver's licence. Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour? Bingo!

Misplaced self-righteousness is a filthy-rich tradition that has condoned war, colonialism, economic exploitation and now reality television. I can imagine Duncan returning from Constantinople in 1204. “Pillage, rape – well, boys will be boys! And I think we've seen a lot of transformatory experiences and examples of personal growth out of it.”

A Christian Big Brother: I'd like to see that. Channel Ten's publicity flacks would be working overtime: "Last night Glenn and Michelle took their relationship to a whole new level. They hugged. Then studied the Bible together (Matthew 5:28-30)."

Christian values, though, need not clash with entertainment values, despite those Christian Television Association spots suggesting otherwise. Lord of the Rings, loved by millions, tells a profoundly Catholic story; and U2, the biggest rock act in the world, can't stop singing about God (though perhaps you thought those were all love songs about girls).

Big Brother as a Christian parable? I've checked the Bible and there's not a thing in there about the virtue of exposing your private parts for the titillation of millions of strangers as a means to fame. Duncan must be hoping we were all born again yesterday.

Irritable bowel syndrome and food allergy?

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/irritable-bowel-syndrome-and-food.html>

Irritable bowel syndrome is common and for some people, causes significant and persistent discomfort. It is unclear exactly what the mechanism and cause of irritable bowel syndrome is, but it is likely that it actually encompasses severe different and distant clinical entities.

Recently, British researchers have found a link between irritable bowel syndrome and food allergies. It will be interesting to note in 10-20 years time what the cause of IBS is believed to be then.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4678309.stm>

Food allergy 'link' to bowel pain

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) may be linked to allergic reactions to common foods, research suggests.

Blood tests have revealed IBS patients have raised levels of antibodies to foods such as wheat, beef, pork, lamb and soya bean, researchers say.

Preliminary trials involving patients avoiding some of these foods have had encouraging results, they add.

The research, by St George's Hospital in London, is published in the American Journal of Gastroenterology.

It is estimated that IBS affects a third of the population, and about one in 10 people suffer symptoms bad enough to go to the doctor.

Symptoms vary but may include abdominal pain and spasm, diarrhoea, constipation and bloated stomach.

Scientists found patients with different types of symptoms, such as diarrhoea and constipation, showed signs of food hypersensitivity.

Body response

Researcher Professor Devinder Kumar said: "Symptoms from the irritable bowel syndrome can compromise the quality life.

"With this simple test, we have scientifically shown that these symptoms may be due to the body's response to what we eat in our daily diet.

"It opens up a new avenue for the management for this large and complex group of patients."

Current research suggests that around 5% of the general population has a hypersensitivity to food.

However, up to 65% of IBS patients believe their condition may be linked to food allergy.

Dr Mark Cottrill, a GP and member of the IBS Network, said a food intolerance test, called the York Test, had helped to identify IBS in some people.

But he told the BBC News website: "Everybody wants one magic pill to cure IBS, but it is probably a multi-factorial condition, which has different causes in different people."

Dr Cottrill said it was possible that in some people IBS was related to a failure of the natural painkilling system to block the discomfort generated by normal movements in the bowels.

Alternatively, the condition has been linked to bowel inflammation brought on by infection.

MP3 is 10 years old

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/mp3-is-10-years-old.html>

MPEG Audio Layer 3, or more commonly referred to as “MP3” is the audio compression scheme that has revolutionised digital music in recent times. Its premise is that it can compress CD digital audio to about a tenth of the size while maintaining “near-CD” quality. For less demanding sources (e.g., FM-radio or voice only broadcasts), even lower “bitrates” (i.e., smaller filesize for length of audio) can be used.

If it wasn't for MP3, iPods wouldn't exist. Similarly, the new “pod-cast” systems generally use MP3 as well. I was actually an early adopter of MP3 technology though I didn't really start using it until early 1997. The only MP3 encoder that was available was the Fraunhofer command console encoder and on my Pentium Classic 200 MHz PC, each hour of audio would take about 6 hours to encode! “Ripping” or digitally extracting an audio CD for conversion was also not a trivial task... considering at this time, I only had a 2 Gb hard disk and most CD readers of that age were not designed to extract digital audio natively.

Now, it would take no more than minutes to fully convert an audio CD to MP3!

Although there are new digital audio codecs out (e.g., AAC, WMA and Ogg Vorbis) none of these have the universal compatibility and usability of MP3.

Source article

<http://www.c10n.info/archives/70>

Fraunhofer IIS: Happy Birthday MP3!

On July 14th, the name “MP3” celebrates its tenth anniversary. On this day back in 1995, the researchers at Fraunhofer Institute for Integrated Circuits IIS decided to use “.mp3” as the file name extension for their new audio coding technology. Soon MP3 became the generally accepted acronym for the ISO standard IS 11172-3 “MPEG Audio Layer 3”.

.mp3 emerged as the unanimous winner of an internal poll at Fraunhofer IIS. In an email dated July 14th 1995, the new file extension was proclaimed:

Date: Fri, 14 Jul 1995 12:29:49 +0200
Subject: Layer3 file extension: .mp3

Hi all,

this is the overwhelming result of our poll: everyone voted for .mp3 as extension for ISO MPEG Audio Layer 3! As a consequence, everyone please mind that for WWW pages, shareware, demos, and so on, the .bit extension is not to be used anymore. There is a reason for that, believe me :-)

Juergen Zeller

(translated from German)

This naming can be seen as the conclusion of years of research and development in a team of up to 40 engineers. The format's international standardization in 1992 ensured worldwide compatibility – this fact and the public MP3 source code guarantee that billions of existing MP3 files can still be played by generations of audiophiles to come.

In 1987, the Fraunhofer IIS started to work on perceptual audio coding in the framework of the EUREKA project EU147, Digital Audio Broadcasting (DAB). In a joint cooperation with the University of Erlangen (Prof. Dieter Seitzer), the Fraunhofer IIS finally devised a very powerful algorithm that is standardized as ISO-MPEG Audio Layer-3 (IS 11172-3 and IS 13818-3).

In 1992 MP3 was in fact so far ahead of its times, that the industry considered the technology far too complex for practical application. It turned out, however, that its development was the bottom line advancement in audio coding – no other coding method so far could uncrown MP3 as the standard for digital music on the computer and on the Internet.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, July 13th, 2005 at 12:08 pm by Sachin Garg

The brave new world of “smart” drugs

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/brave-new-world-of-smart-drugs.html>

Though it has been somewhat hidden away in modern society, there is already a plethora of drugs that people use to “boost” their cognition. For example, there are those who use anti-depressants (SSRIs like fluoxetine aka “Prozac”) to help boost attention before exams. Similarly, agents like methylphenidate (aka “Ritalin”) are used.

Of course, these drugs are not without (significant) side-effects and their primary use is not for improving attention or memory.

However, there are a number of new chemicals that are being studied, usually for bona fide conditions that have shown some remarkable effects. A new drug called CX717 which is an “ampakine” has been shown to significantly improve healthy volunteers’ wakefulness, alertness and cognitive performance after sleep deprivation. Moreover, it is without the usually “jitteriness” of things like caffeine or amphetamines. In fact, there are few side-effects at all. After further testing, this drug will possibly be marketed for narcolepsy, ADHD and Alzheimer’s disease. But, the “off-label” use of such a drug would be enormous.

If someone used such an agent before an academic examination, would it be considered cheating?

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4678895.stm>

Brain-boost drugs ‘to be common’

Healthy people, including children, might one day take drugs to boost their intelligence, scientists predict.

The think-tank Foresight, outlined the scenario in an independent report looking at potential developments over the next 20 years.

Such “cognitive enhancers” could become as “common as coffee”, they suggest.

Scientists did not rule out children taking exams facing drug tests, as sportsmen do, to see if any have taken ‘performance enhancing substances’.

The report was compiled by 50 experts, who set out their predictions for the next two decades.

More consideration

Some drugs are already known to aid mental performance.

Ritalin, now prescribed to children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), has already been used by some students to improve their performance in exams.

Modafinil, used now to treat sleep disorders, has been shown to help people remember numbers more effectively.

It can also make people think more carefully before making decisions.

There is also a type of molecule called ampakins, which enhance the way some chemical receptors in the brain work, suggesting drugs could be developed to improve people's memory when they are tired.

The Foresight report states: "In a world that is increasingly non-stop and competitive, the individual's use of such substances may move from the fringe to the norm, with cognition enhancers used as coffee is today".

But the availability of such drugs would open up a range of social and ethical questions, including whether it should be permitted for people to use them to gain advantage over others.

How they should be monitored would also be an issue.

Regulation

Scientists said it could raise issues about what substances children undertaking exams could use.

Professor Trevor Robbins, of the Department of Experimental Psychology at the University of Cambridge, who helped compile the report, said: "No one minds very much about people taking vitamins to make them do a little bit better.

"But taking a natural, or unnatural, substance in exams might cause some ethical problems along the lines that we have in sport."

Professor Gerry Stimson, an expert in the sociology of health behaviour at Imperial College London, who also helped compile the report, said: "Would this be putting people at a fair advantage, or an unfair advantage?"

"It is permitted to take drugs for therapeutic reasons, but you would need a regulatory framework for well people."

But the scientists say the drugs could become commonplace.

Professor Robbins said: “You have to look 20 years into the future.

“It’s possible that these new drugs will be the new coffee, if you like, and taken by a broad range of individuals.”

The report also looks at potential for vaccines against addictions to nicotine or cocaine, which would offer treatments for addicts by blocking the effects of the drug in the body.

It also looked at the potential for drugs to treat or delay the progress of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases.

Sir David King, chief scientific advisor to the government, who oversaw the project, said “By examining challenging issues, such as brain science and addiction, scientists can help inform the government and others by building a strong scientific evidence base.

“This will provide the best platform to help us prepare for the future.”

Lorenzo's Oil

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/lorenzos-oil.html>

As one who has seen the Hollywood portrayal of the story “Lorenzo’s Oil”, I have to admit that the impression I got from the movie was that the oil was just about 100% effective at preventing the onset of neurological decline in those boys affected with adrenoleukodystrophy (ALD). There has recently been an article published in the Archives of Neurology that find that the oil is effective in fending off symptoms. This is no surprise.

What I did find surprising was that the oil only reduced the likelihood of developing symptoms from 35% to 11%. That is, it is far from a cure. In addition, it is unclear whether the oil actually slows or stops the progression of neurological decline once the symptoms have started.

Unless my memory is faulty, this is definitely not the message the Hollywood movie was giving out. If this is the case, the movie does much more harm to research into ALD than help.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/expert-admits-he-was-wrong-on-lorenzos-oil/2005/07/12/1120934245504.html>

Expert admits he was wrong on Lorenzo's Oil

July 13, 2005

New research offers scientific vindication for the parents whose fight to save their ailing son inspired the 1992 film *Lorenzo's Oil*.

It comes too late to help the real Lorenzo, who is 27 and almost totally paralysed, but suggests that the oil could help save future generations of boys from the same, fatal nerve disorder.

The paper, published in the *Archives of Neurology* on Monday, found that the oil was often effective at fending off symptoms in boys with the inherited genetic disease adrenoleukodystrophy, or ALD, in which there is progressive neurological deterioration, that devastated Lorenzo Odone.

Among 89 boys who started taking the oil – an extract of olive and rapeseed oil – before symptoms appeared, only 11 per cent went on to develop them, compared with the usual 35 per cent.

In clashes between activist parents and resistant doctors, the medical establishment has been extremely sceptical about the effectiveness of Lorenzo's oil. Among those sceptics was a professor at Johns Hopkins University, Hugo Moser, the lead author of the new paper.

“Even though many people – and I must say, myself not excluded – maligned the oil, this study, which as far as I can tell is scientifically sound, showed that it does have an effect on certain types of ALD,” Dr Moser said. “It suggests to me that it's more than snake oil.”

The paper does not address whether Lorenzo's oil which is extracted from olive and rapeseed oil and must be combined with a low-fat diet, can slow the disease once its symptoms have already begun. Previous studies had found that it did not seem to help.

But the new research does raise the possibility that early tests, which Dr Moser is working to develop now, could pick up Lorenzo's disease in babies, and that it could then be stopped before it does them damage.

Its authors also recommend that the oil become standard treatment for young boys with the disease who have not yet shown symptoms.

ALD affects about one child in 30,000, generally striking boys between ages 4 and 10.

The Boston Globe, Los Angeles Times

Fujitsu full colour e-paper

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/fujitsu-full-colour-e-paper.html>



Fujitsu's version of "e-paper"

E-ink has been around for a while and from memory, the company that developed it has been swallowed up by Philips. However, the limitations to that particular

technology have been that it is monochrome only. Still, as far as I know, it is the only version of "e-paper" that has been put into consumer electronics (the Sony Libre e-book and a new trendy watch).

Looking around on the internet, I see that there are actually quite a few "bistable" displays that are already available – though I have not seen them actually used in anything. "Bistable" basically means that once the image is "set", it stays "on" without any power.

Fujitsu has recently announced that it has created a full colour electronic paper that is also flexible. From the picture, it looks

very exciting. I hope that someone develops an e-book reader that uses this display!

Source article

<http://www.laptoplogic.com/news/07/13/2005/358/0/>

Fujitsu Develops World's First Bendable Electronic Paper

07/13/2005 04:45 AM

The new electronic paper features vivid color images that are unaffected even when the screen is bent, and features an image memory function that enables continuous display of the same image without the need for electricity. The thin and flexible electronic paper uses very low power to change screen images, thereby making it ideal for displaying information or advertisements in public areas as a type of new electronic media that can be handled as easily as paper.

According to Fujitsu, key features of Fujitsu's new electronic paper:

1. No electricity required for continuous display, minimal power consumption when changing screen image, thanks to the image memory function.
2. High-level display performance: the paper is constructed of three colors: red, blue, and green. Since no filters or polarizing layers are required, it features color that is more vivid than conventional reflective-type LCDs. In addition, the screen does not flicker.
3. Flexible film substrate: since it can be bent, it allows a wide range of potential applications.

Some examples where this screen could be used:

- Transit advertising on trains, information displays on curved surfaces, and other public display applications that could take advantage of its light weight and flexibility. Information displayed

can be updated based on the time of day, enabling more effective advertising and informational signage.

- Electronic shelf display tags, point-of-purchase displays, restaurant menus, and other in-store uses. Can also be used for pricing displays or product information displays that stand out in full color and can be readily updated.
- Operating manuals, work orders, and other short-term information displays, facilitating the trend toward paperless offices or factories.
- Text or images from mobile phones or other mobile devices can be transferred wirelessly to larger displays for easy viewing.
- Use in the home can offer more convenient digital-media devices that can be carried from room to room.

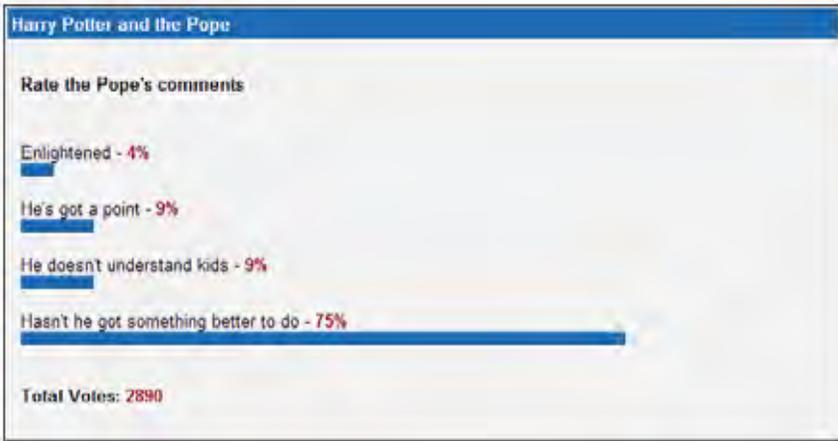
The electronic paper will be showcased at Fujitsu Forum 2005, to be held July 14 and 15 at Tokyo International Forum.

Pope Benedict is not a Potter fan

Thursday, July 14, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/pope-benedict-is-not-potter-fan.html>

READER POLL



Poll from the Sydney Morning Herald

The new Pope Benedict does not appear to be a fan of Harry Potter. Specifically, he believes that it,

“...distort Christianity in the soul...”

Well I agree with the majority of voters at the Sydney Morning Herald website. He should stop wasting time being concerned about Harry Potter and focus on more important issues.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/books/pope-frowns-on-potter/2005/07/14/1120934334646.html>

Pope frowns on Potter

July 14, 2005 – 10:26AM

Pope Benedict believes the Harry Potter books subtly seduce young readers and “distort Christianity in the soul” before it can develop properly, according to comments attributed to him by a German writer.

Gabriele Kuby, who has written a book called *Harry Potter – Good or Evil*, which attacks J. K. Rowling’s best-selling series about the boy wizard, published extracts from two letters written to her by Benedict in 2003, when he was a cardinal.

Kuby, a devout Catholic, had sent him a copy of her Potter critique and he wrote to thank her, according to a passage from one of the letters published in German on her website.

“It is good that you enlighten people about Harry Potter, because these are subtle seductions which act unnoticed and, by this, deeply distort Christianity in the soul, before it can grow properly,” Benedict wrote, according to the excerpt.

A Vatican official was not immediately able to comment on the remarks attributed to Benedict, who is on holiday in the Alps. Reuters was unable to reach Kuby by telephone.

The sixth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, is due to be published on July 16, with millions of copies already shipped to stores around the world.

After Benedict was named Pope in April, his own writings shot to the top of the German book charts and dislodged the most recent book in the Potter series from No. 1.

The Vatican had previously appeared to approve of the books, saying they helped children to understand the difference between good and evil.

Kuby maintains the opposite, listing, among 10 arguments against Harry Potter: “The ability of the reader to distinguish between good and evil is overridden by emotional manipulation and intellectual obfuscation.”

In one of the letters, Benedict gives Kuby permission to publicise his opinion.

“Somehow your letter got buried in the large pile of name-day, birthday and Easter mail,” he writes.

“Finally this pile is taken care of, so that I can gladly allow you to refer to my judgement about Harry Potter.”

Vatican officials earlier this year condemned Dan Brown's Catholic conspiracy bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone in March blasted the book as an absurd distortion of history, saying it was full of cheap lies and Catholic bookstores should take it off their shelves.

Reuters

Parasite genomes have been sequenced

Friday, July 15, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/parasite-genomes-have-been-sequenced.html>

Three parasites, responsible for Chagas disease, African sleeping sickness and leishmaniasis have had their genomes sequenced. This development is hoped to bring along the development of new drugs to fight these disease. Unfortunately, as these diseases occur mainly in non-Western countries, relatively little research (insofar as drug development) has gone into them. Now, the commonly used drugs often don't work well and may be dangerous.

The sequencing of the genomes of these organisms give a much better background of information to look for potential cures. As all three organisms share many of the same genes, it is hoped that whatever treatments discovered may be effective for all three.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4681707.stm>

Parasites' genetic code 'cracked'

International scientists say they have sequenced the genomes of three parasites responsible for diseases that kill more than 150,000 people a year.

Their understanding should help with treatments for Chagas disease, African sleeping sickness and leishmaniasis caused by the three pathogens.

It might even be possible to make vaccines, they told Science journal.

More than 250 scientists were involved in the project, including experts from the Wellcome Trust.

Unique opportunity

New drugs to treat these so-called “neglected diseases” are desperately needed, say scientists.

Many of the treatments used are decades old, carry side effects – some fatal – and often do not work because the parasites have developed resistance to them.

The disease that makes people zombies

Researcher Professor Sanjeev Krishna from the University of London said: “Treating sleeping sickness is like a form of medical Russian Roulette because you don’t know who will be saved or killed by the treatment available.

“It shouldn’t be like that now we have completed this sequencing programme we can concentrate on finding the ‘magic bullet’ medicines that will help eradicate this disease.”

The parasites

The three parasites – *Trypanosoma cruzi*, *Trypanosoma brucei* and *leishmania major* – contain between 8,000 and 12,000 genes, but have more than 6,000 in common.

Najib El-Saed, molecular biologist at the Institute for Genomic Research, Rockville, the US, said this meant it might be possible to make drugs to fight all three diseases at once.

More than 500 million people are at risk for one or more of these diseases so the potential of the scientists' findings is huge, said the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative.

DNDI project manager Dr Els Thorreel said: "It's fantastic that we have all this information now available.

The parasite diseases

Sleeping sickness is spread by the tsetse fly

Chagas disease is spread by bites from beetle-like bugs

Leishmaniasis is spread through bites from sand flies.

"This will be a big leap forward in the future. Within the next five to 10 years it should give a number of new ideas for finding better cures for these diseases."

She said it should also help scientists develop better diagnostic tests to identify and treat people early.

Dr Bernard Pecoul, executive director of the initiative, said funding was now needed to push forward this research.

Sleeping sickness disturbs a person's circadian rhythm so they stay awake at night and sleep during the day. It leaves them unable to perform simple mental tasks, such as folding a piece of paper. Fever can progress to heart, kidney and neurological problems and death.

The parasite that causes Chagas disease can lie dormant in the individual for up to 20 years before causing severe internal damage, normally to the heart.

There are three sorts of leishmaniasis, which vary in severity. The most dangerous, known as visceral leishmaniasis or black fever, is nearly always fatal if it is left untreated.

Another type, mucocutaneous leishmaniasis, produces disfiguring lesions which destroy the mucous membranes of the nose, mouth and throat.

Cutaneous leishmaniasis tends to cause multiple sores on the skin.

Firefox's market share creeps upwards

Saturday, July 16, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/firefoxs-market-share-creeps-upwards.html>



Mozilla Firefox, the great free competitor to Microsoft's Internet Explorer web browser has recorded yet another increase in its market share. It has been inexorably increasing in popularity with approximately 0.5-1% rise in its market share per month. It is expected that it should cross the 10% threshold sometime later this year.

Source Article

<http://www.pcworld.com/resource/article/0,aid,121843,pg,1,RSS,RSS,00.asp>

Firefox Continues to Spread

- Juan Carlos Perez, IDG News Service
- Friday, July 15, 2005

The Mozilla Foundation's Firefox browser nibbled off a small market-share portion from Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE) in June, continuing a consistent monthly trend this year.

Firefox increased its market share to 8.71 percent, up from 8 percent in May, while IE's share shrank to 86.56 percent from 87.23 percent,

NetApplications.com, an Aliso Viejo, California, maker of applications for monitoring and measuring Web site usage, said this week in a statement.

Steadily Increasing

Since the beginning of the year, Firefox has increased its market share every month between 0.5 percent and 1 percent, mostly at the expense of IE, according to NetApplications.com, which compiles its browser usage data from more than 40,000 Web sites monitored by its HitsLink.com service.

As Firefox approaches the 10 percent market share milestone, it is expected to gain “significant traction” once its acceptance grows among corporations, according to NetApplications.com.

Rounding out the top five browsers in June were Apple Computer's Safari with 1.93 percent market share, America Online's Netscape with 1.55 percent, and Opera Software's Opera with 0.59 percent.

Labour politics of the medical workforce in Venezuela

Saturday, July 16, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/labour-politics-of-medical-workforce.html>

Doctors in Venezuela have marched through the capital Caracas protesting against the influx of Cuban doctors and dentists. The president of Venezuela Hugo Chavez invited the Cuban medical officers to Venezuela to provide free health care to the nations poor. Apparently, this has worked relatively well.

However, this liberalisation of labour has lead to some serious problems within Venezuela's domestic medical workforce. Firstly, there is the issue of poor pay... undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that the Cuban workers would not be paid an equivalent income. Secondly, there is the issue of clinical competence. Thirdly, there is the question of political infiltration.

Nevertheless, it is not an issue that can be easily resolved. The Cuban medical officers are providing inexpensive health care in places that there would otherwise be none.

Source articles

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4688117.stm>

Venezuela doctors in Cuba protest

Hundreds of Venezuelan doctors have marched through the country's capital, Caracas, demanding the expulsion of Cuban doctors.

President Hugo Chavez says he invited the medical staff into the country to provide free health care for the poor.

But Venezuela's doctors, who are also asking for better wages, say the Cubans are taking their jobs.

They say the government is trading its oil revenues to pay for some 20,000 Cuban doctors and dentists.

Dressed in white medical gowns and bearing national flags, some 400 doctors and medical staff carried banners reading 'No More Cubanisation!' as they marched.

Doctors for oil

Under a special programme set up by Mr Chavez and his ally Cuban President Fidel Castro, Cuban doctors, dentists and nurses work in newly set-up medical centres in Venezuela's poorest areas.

In exchange, the oil-rich country sends Cuba 90,000 barrels of oil a day.

The "Barrio Adentro" or "Into the Neighbourhood" programme has won Mr Chavez great popularity among the country's poor.

It is believed to have helped him win a referendum last year.

But organisers of the march say salaries have remained unchanged for four years and many cannot now find work due to the influx of Cuban doctors.

'Indoctrination'

They say that while the Cuban-staffed clinics are equipped with medicines and modern machines, public hospitals often lack basic medical equipment.

“Venezuelan doctors are underpaid and many are unemployed,” trauma specialist Pedro Carvallo told Reuters news agency.

He said many Cuban doctors do not hold proper medical qualifications.

“These Cubans are political agents who come to indoctrinate, not to work as doctors,” Mr Carvallo said.

Mr Chavez says the Cubans have accepted jobs in areas, including crime-ridden slums on the outskirts of towns, where many Venezuelans refuse to work.

Fidel Castro has said that he aims to increase the number of Cuban health care workers in Venezuela to up to 30,000 by the end of the year.

The criminalisation of the mentally ill

Saturday, July 16, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/criminalisation-of-mentally-ill.html>

Though perhaps not appreciated by the general community, there is something that is almost immediately obvious to anyone who has worked in the field of mental health; that services and resources for the mentally ill are woefully inadequate for the need.

Acute psychiatric services are just that. Acute. People are generally only admitted into a public psychiatric hospital when they are in imminent or immediate risk of harming themselves or others. Indeed, even when only looking at this small group of individuals, there are barely enough beds available.

Everyone else have to try to access the sparse community mental health services. Indeed, in the local area that I working just before, it was essentially impossible to refer someone to see a psychiatrist. Refer to the community mental health team means assessment by a mental health nurse or psychologist. Depending on their assessment of the severity of their need, they may get to see a psychiatric registrar (i.e., doctor-in-training). Some of the local psychiatrists had waiting lists of over a year for an initial consultation!

Unfortunately, there are a group of people with a mental illness who although do not need an admission into an acute care bed,

simply cannot function independently in the community. Eventually, the forensic system becomes involved. NSW gaols are simply full of people with severe mental illness. Up to 10% have symptoms of psychosis!

IMHO, this is a massive systems failure. The recommendations of the Richmond Report two decades ago were well intentioned, but they have failed the mentally ill. Some sort of institutionalised care is required for some patients with mental illness and denial of this simple truth has simply meant for many people that “institution” is “gaol”.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/National/Psychiatrists-want-ill-out-of-jails/2005/07/16/1121455924029.html>

Psychiatrists want ill out of jails

July 16, 2005 – 6:24AM

Leading psychiatrists claim that Australian prisons have replaced asylums as holding centres for the mentally ill.

News Ltd newspapers report that the psychiatrists want a radical review of mental healthcare after admitting that a 20-year policy of treating mental patients in the community has failed.

The report says those calling for a new approach include many of the architects of the current policy of de-institutionalisation which led to the closure of psychiatry wards and institutions around the country.

It says that high on their list of priorities is the reopening of secure psychiatric wards and in increase in the number of medium and long-term

beds for the mentally ill to take the pressure off prisons which are ill-equipped to deal with the number of mentally ill inmates.

In the two decades since the influential Richmond Report recommended de-institutionalising mental healthcare, the number of patients in psychiatric institutions has more than halved from around 15,000 to 6,000.

But the prison population more than doubled between 1986 and 2001 to in excess of 24,000 and now includes a high proportion of mentally ill prisoners.

A recent study by Corrections Health Service found that 74 per cent of prisoners in NSW suffered from a psychiatric disorder, with more than 10 per cent showing symptoms of psychosis.

According to the report, the Mental Health Council of Australia will in coming months release a damning report exposing “serious problems” and “failures of care” in facilities around the country.

Prayer power – ineffective for health outcomes

Saturday, July 16, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/prayer-power-ineffective-for-health.html>

Although it is a nice thought, appealing to a “higher power” does not positively affect health outcomes. This reminds me of the other study within the last year that looked at whether someone dying of cancer could “hang on” for important events. That study showed that willpower had no effect either.

Interestingly, a study which looked at alcoholism and prayer showed that those people who knew that someone was praying for them were drinking significantly more alcohol at the end of six months!

Prayer should be appreciated for what it is; something that gives emotional and spiritual comfort and be left at that.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/dont-worry-if-you-havent-got-a-prayer/2005/07/15/1121429359119.html>

Don't worry if you haven't got a prayer

- By Michael Stroh
- July 16, 2005

Praying for someone who is ill and preparing to undergo a risky medical procedure appears to have no effect on the patient's future health.

That is the finding of one of the largest scientific investigations of the power of prayer conducted to date. Scientists said the study, published yesterday in *The Lancet*, will undoubtedly renew debate over whether prayer has a measurable effect on illness and even whether it is a suitable subject of scientific inquiry.

Researchers at Duke University in North Carolina recruited nearly 750 people undergoing heart-related procedures. Religious groups of different denominations were randomly assigned to pray for the health of half the volunteers. The other half received no organised prayers.

Researchers found that the prayers, offered by representatives of Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist faiths, had no effect on whether patients experienced post-procedure complications such as heart attack, death or readmission to the hospital.

The researchers did find that another non-traditional intervention, MIT therapy, which involves playing music and administering therapeutic touch at the bedside, did have a slight beneficial health effect.

Volunteers who received MIT therapy had less emotional distress before their procedures and slightly lower mortality rates six months after admission.

Recent research on prayer has been highly controversial. Most studies have focused on intercessory prayer – petitions made directly on behalf of someone else – as opposed to patients praying for themselves.

While some studies have found measurable clinical effects, critics say they are often riddled with statistical flaws.

Some prayer studies are difficult to interpret. For example, when researchers at the University of New Mexico looked at the effect of prayer on

recovering alcoholics, they found that patients who knew they were being prayed for actually wound up drinking significantly more at the end of the six-month study.

“Nobody disputes that religious practices bring comfort to people in times of illness,” said Richard Sloan, a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia University in New York and a frequent critic of prayer research.

“The question is, can medicine add anything to that? It trivialises the religious experience to think you can subject it to the measurement of science.”

In a standard clinical trial of a new drug, for example, researchers monitor how much medicine a volunteer receives.

“But how do you define a ‘dose’ of prayer?” Professor Sloan said.

The Washington Post

Immigration department a result of Ruddock's ineptitude

Sunday, July 17, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/immigration-department-result-of.html>

The Immigration Department is a shambles. The cases of Cornelia Rau (an Australian citizen with florid psychotic illness imprisoned as an illegal immigrant for 2 years) and Vivian Solon (an Australian citizen “deported” to the Philippines) alone were evidence enough of serious system failures. Thankfully, the Palmer report has condemned the Immigration Department and highlighted some of the failings – some of which are frightening. The Immigration Department has essentially more power than most in detaining someone. However, the report has revealed that immigration officials did not understand the powers that they held and had little if any formal investigative training.

Although Amanda Vanstone is now taking the criticism as the Minister, it should be remembered that it was during Philip Ruddock's time as the minister responsible for immigration that the Immigration Department decayed into the cesspit it is now. Ruddock is now Attorney-General and in charge of our protection against terrorist attacks... Suddenly, I feel just that little bit less safe.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/slippery-escape-for-invisible-villains/2005/07/15/1121422838554.html>

Slippery escape for invisible villains

- By Alan Ramsey
- July 16, 2005

Where are you, Philip Ruddock? The minister in charge of the disgraced Immigration Department for 7½ years is the same minister now responsible for the safety of the nation's key infrastructure against terrorist attacks. Makes you think, doesn't it? It was under Ruddock's authority that rank bureaucratic incompetence and political brigandry abused and misused the immigration detention system the Government inherited in March 1996. John Howard's latest slitherings in political crisis management this week ignored Ruddock's primary culpability.

Amanda Vanstone did not.

Ruddock, the Liberals' election hero of the 2001 campaign, is now Attorney-General. Howard moved him there in late September 2003 in an extensive reshuffle for the 2004 election year that included replacing Ruddock with Vanstone in Immigration. Two nights ago, after that day's formal release of Mick Palmer's devastating report, Vanstone fronted ABC television's 7.30 Report, where Maxine McKew asked: "It's not your finest hour as minister, is it?"

Choosing her words with care, Vanstone replied: "No minister likes to be in a position where things haven't gone as they should have. But, in a sense, that's the position of a minister. You get to be there in the good times and the bad times, and you have to take responsibility for fixing [the bad times]."

Vanstone's emphasis on "fixing", as distinct from "creating", was not lost on her government colleagues. It would not have been lost on her predecessor, either.

McKew persisted: “Do you take responsibility for what Mick Palmer has said today, that [the Immigration Department] is defensive, self-protective, has poorly trained officers with huge powers and no constraint on those powers?”

Vanstone was just as deliberate. “If you mean,” she said, “do I feel personally responsible for that situation arising, no. That’s been the situation for quite some considerable time, and by that I mean decades.”

Vanstone did not mean any such thing.

The period she was pointedly referring to was March 1996 to September 29, 2003, when Ruddock was minister. Those were the years the detention system was politically corrupted and administratively debauched, particularly from August 2001 onwards. Whatever degree of ministerial responsibility now rightfully attaches to Vanstone’s 21 months in the job, she simply got the fag end of Ruddock’s long, degraded regime.

As for the Westminster principle of ministerial responsibility, that is simply a farce with this Government. Howard and Vanstone on Thursday afternoon engaged in one of the more brazen and arrogant exercises in political effrontery. They stood, side by side, at a Canberra press conference and thumbed the Government’s nose at responsibility for the litany of failures in the Palmer report.

Q: “Prime Minister, did you give any consideration, in light of this report, to replacing [Vanstone]?”

Howard: “No.”

Q: “Why not?”

Howard: "Because I don't think the circumstances supported such a decision. I indicated last weekend that ministers should go if they are directly responsible for significant failings or mistakes, or if their continued presence is damaging to the Government. I have full confidence in Senator Vanstone. I don't think for a moment, in this case, either of those conditions arose."

Howard's attitude is as obvious as its arrogance. What this Prime Minister cares about is politics, not principle or standards. Any of his ministers can (and do) survive idiocy or incompetence. What a minister cannot survive is Howard's view that he or she is a political burden. It is a standard he has lived by for all but the first year of his prime ministership. You only have to read what used to be (in writing) his ministerial code of conduct to understand how corrupted it has become.

What the community at large has not yet understood is the low threshold of this Government's collective competence and the level of intimidation across the bureaucracy. The Maritime Transport Security Amendment Bill would seem to be a reasonable example of both.

This legislation passed through Parliament last month. Its purpose is to regulate increased security of Australia's offshore oil and gas industry. Part of this process is a national system of port and wharf security identification cards. The bureaucracy believes as many as 130,000 security cards will have to be issued to Australia's waterfront and shipping workforce, in the same way as a security card system operates at Australia's major airports.

But these new security cards will be issued only after a police and ASIO background check on each and every worker. A team of bureaucrats has been consulting employers and unions for nine months.

Eight days ago the head of the "Maritime Security Identity Team, Office of Transport Security, Department of Transport" emailed the individual

members of the “working group” the team had been consulting. The message said: “Attached is a copy of the final [identity card] regulations. In order for these regulations to be made at a meeting of the Executive Council on July 21, we will not be able to accept any more amendments. I have also attached for your information a copy of the draft minutes from the working group meeting of June 28. Thank you all for your contributions.”

That was Friday of last week.

Recall what day that was?

That's right – the day after four terrorist bombs closed down London's public transport system for 24 hours and killed, maimed or injured 760 people. Suddenly, it seems, here in Australia, there was new urgency within the Government about heightened security at our ports, wharves and offshore oil and gas fields.

Only, what these “final” regulations governing who would get identity cards did was add a section of the Crimes Act not previously negotiated with the working group. And when a Senate committee, directed by vote of the Senate last month to look at the proposed regulations, held a public hearing on Tuesday this week, three exceedingly angry union representatives took a verbal axe to what the bureaucrats had done.

Danni Whyte, Transport Workers Union: “The working group had carefully considered [for months] the list of crimes against which applicants will have their backgrounds checked. [Then] we were presented with an email last Friday which potentially completely changes one of the most fundamental issues ... There are 30 more crimes against which people's backgrounds will be checked. One of those is ‘interfering with political activity’. That throws up all sorts of concerns ... Any crimes should have a demonstrable link to terrorist activity.”

Patrick Johnston, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union: “We have been aware of the need to secure facilities, but it must be done in a way where everybody’s rights are protected and nobody is discriminated against. It is the hidden agendas that can cause us concern, and the abuse of the legislation.”

Dean Summers, Maritime Union of Australia: “What we saw in the first draft was a reference to part 15HB of the Crimes Act 1914. The second draft – the one we received last Friday afternoon – changed the reference and referred to part 11 of the Crimes Act, which also includes picket lines, industrial disputation and lockouts. That is certainly not a question of terrorism. We think it has overstepped the mark, and without any consultation.”

When four federal bureaucrats from Transport Security appeared later the same day, the Liberals’ Bill Heffernan, as committee chairman, asked the official who’d sent the controversial email: “Ms Liubestic, were you instructed to send the email?” Three times he asked before the official said yes, she was ordered. She named “the executive I work for”.

And why the July 21 Executive Council date, asked Heffernan, given the committee had been directed to report to the Senate on August 9? “You would have been aware of this Senate process. Just answer yes or no, do not talk in code please.” Official: “Yes.”

Heffernan: “So, in my view, what you are doing is telling us to go to hell. You are not, but someone is. I would like to think Parliament is a valid process. The political process is that we should investigate the regulations, as demanded by Parliament, and report back on August 9.”

Official: “We feel keenly the responsibility to deliver government decisions on transport security ...” Heffernan: “So do we!” Official: “... and if there is a charge that has been levelled against us from time to time it is that we have

moved too quickly. [In this case] while we are searching for a time frame to meet the Government's requirements, the regulations are not set in stone."

Heffernan: "So you are saying there is room for change?"

Official: "Absolutely."

There were some heated exchanges before the committee adjourned the hearing late in the afternoon on the understanding nothing would happen to the 38 pages of proposed regulations at a meeting of the Executive Council on July 21. At one point, Heffernan told a witness: "You're talking bullshit." This appears in the official transcript as: "That is a load of rubbish." Heffernan apologised as the hearing closed.

He said: "I thank everybody and apologise if you were offended by me yelling at you. You should have been offended, so I apologise. But you would have an understanding of where I am coming from." (See panel.)

Nobody can ever be sure where Heffernan, a Junee cattle and wheat farmer and one of the Parliament's more contentious figures, is coming from. However, unlike John Howard and Philip Ruddock, you can never mistake what he's saying.

Sixty year anniversary of first atomic blast test

Sunday, July 17, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/sixty-year-anniversary-of-first-atomic.html>

Sixty years ago, the political sphere of the world change significantly. Scientists working on the Manhattan Project successfully detonated their first atomic device at the Trinity Site of the White Sands Missile Range on 16 July 1945.

The rest, as they say, is “history”. The two atomic bombs dropped on Japan ended the Second World War but also killed hundreds of thousands of people and caused radiation related illness for decades. Nuclear arms races between the US and the former Soviet Union led to the stalemate of the Cold War. Dozens of countries have developed or are now are developing their own nuclear weapons as a measure of military and political significance (e.g., Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, Iran).

There was a time after the fall of the Soviet Union for world disarmament but that opportunity has been lost. Indeed, with the US’ sidelining of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and atomic arms race is again inevitable.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/ap/20050716/ap_on_re_us/trinity_anniversary

Thousands Mark World’s First Atomic Blast

By FELICIA FONSECA, Associated Press Writer

WHITE SANDS MISSILE RANGE, N.M. – Thousands of people gathered Saturday at Trinity Site, a restricted area of the White Sands Missile Range, to mark the 60th anniversary of the world's first test of an atomic weapon.

Scientists working at Trinity site as part of The Manhattan Project created the nuclear device used in the test on July 16, 1945. That successful detonation led to the construction of the two atomic bombs that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Japan in August 1945, essentially stunning Japan into surrender and ending World War II.

The depression created by the blast at ground zero on what is now the White Sands Missile Range is marked by an obelisk with a simple inscription: "Trinity Site, Where the World's First Nuclear Device Was Exploded on July 16, 1945."

A long stretch of dirt road leads to a chain-link fence surrounding the monument. On the fence hang photographs of Manhattan Project scientists from Los Alamos assembling the device and of the brilliant mushroom cloud.

Visitors stooped to pick up pieces of trinitite, a radioactive, turquoise crystal-like material that was created by the blast. About a dozen people walked over the site with Geiger counters that beeped sporadically.

Missile Range officials tell visitors not to fear radiation. On average, an American is exposed to 360 millirem of radiation from natural and medical sources every year. In an hour at the Trinity site, visitors are exposed to one half millirem, according to a brochure distributed by the missile range.

Emmett Hatch, who visited Trinity Site on Saturday, recalled how his grandmother ordered him to drop to his knees and pray on July 16, 1945, shortly after the atomic blast.

She was awake at 5:29:45 Mountain War Time that morning in Portales to make breakfast and saw the explosion from more than 220 miles away.

“She thought it was the coming of the Lord, because the sun rose in the west that day,” said Hatch, who was 8 years old at the time.

Andy Aranda, an Albuquerque high school student, said he learned about the Trinity test from textbooks.

“It’s kind of creepy, kind of eerie to be right here where it happened,” he said.

Clemente Deister of Socorro was in the Marines fighting in the South Pacific during World War II when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

He watched the faces of visitors to the Trinity Site on Saturday. “I find all kinds of expressions of sadness and horror,” he said.

The blast produced a flash of light that was seen 250 miles away, a roar heard 50 miles away and a mushroom cloud that rose 40,000 feet.

“The most amazing part of it to all of us is that it seemed to last so long,” Jay Wechsler of Espanola, who measured the explosion that day, recalled in an interview before the Trinity Site tour. “The cloud just looked like it was boiling and luminescent and kept on going up and up and up and seemed like it was never going to stop.”

“I had no conception that it could wipe out a small city,” said Herb Lehr of Mesa, Ariz., who helped put the bomb together at Trinity Site.

Ben Benjamin, a photographer who documented the Manhattan Project, recalled that after seeing the blast he said: “My God, it’s beautiful.”

But Benjamin, who did not go on Saturday’s tour, said another man who worked on the project told him the blast was horrible and that he could think of nothing more than the moral implications.

“I thought about it, of course,” said Benjamin, who now lives in Albuquerque. “But I also thought, ‘Didn’t these guys bring it on themselves?’ Look what they did at Pearl Harbor.”

Longtime Los Alamos lab critic Greg Mello said on the eve of the 60th anniversary that the United States still has not come to grips with the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

“These acts we still consider to be somehow, if not noble, then somewhat justified. They were manifestly illegal at the time and terribly immoral. By any standard, they were crimes,” he said.

Many of those involved in the Manhattan Project said they had no regrets.

“It was important work. People were pretty driven to get things done in the length of time we did,” said Wechsler, who did not attend the tour. “Motivation is hardly the world. Driven is more like it. The goals were set, and people moved ahead and got on with the work. We all felt it was pretty important.”

ENPP1 gene linked to diabetes and obesity

Monday, July 18, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/enpp1-gene-linked-to-diabetes-and.html>

The ENPP1 gene has been linked to obesity and to type 2 diabetes mellitus. It is likely that there are many other (possibly more relevant) factors that play in the development of these conditions; in particular, poor diets and lack of exercise. However, it is clear that there is a genetic component as well as evidenced by obesity and diabetes that seem to “run” in families.

It is hoped that by identifying those people at particular risk of obesity and diabetes in childhood, that early intervention (i.e., change in lifestyle factors) will help to reduce the burden of disease later in life.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4686611.stm>

DNA test for diabetes and obesity

Scientists say they have discovered a gene linked to diabetes and obesity, offering hope for a diagnostic test.

Faulty versions of the gene ENPP1 disrupt the way the body stores energy and handles sugar by blocking the hormone insulin.

Children with faulty versions were obese at as young as five years old.

The Imperial College London team told Nature Genetics that spotting the problem early and intervening could save lives.

Experts have already predicted that the UK is facing an obesity and diabetes time bomb, with rates soaring among children and adults alike.

The number of people in the UK with diabetes is predicted to reach three million by 2010.

Diabetes and obesity increase the likelihood of potentially fatal diseases such as heart attacks.

While inactivity and poor diets are much to blame for obesity and the metabolic problems that can lead to full-blown diabetes, the authors of the latest study say some people are genetically prone as well.

Genetically prone

In these individuals – up to 20% of Caucasians and 50% of black communities – leading a healthier lifestyle from the outset is imperative if they are to avoid problems in later life, say Dr Philippe Froguel and his team.

They looked at French families with a strong history of diabetes and obesity and compared them with families that did not.

When they compared the genes of 1,225 children who were grossly obese or overweight at ages five and 11 with 1,205 normal weight children they found an obvious pattern – many of the obese children possessed culprit versions of ENPP1.

When they looked at the adults in the families, they found a similar link between the ENPP1 variants and obesity, as well as between the gene variants and early warning signs of diabetes.

ENPP1 was also linked to full-blown type 2 diabetes in the adults.

Storing up trouble

Dr Froguel said: “What is extremely worrying is the children who had these mutations developed obesity at an early age – age five to six – and diabetes occurred in middle age.”

He said that although the discovery would not lead to a ‘magic pill’ for curing obesity and type 2 diabetes, it could help in identifying groups and individuals at increased risk.

“If we can identify those at risk at an earlier age, it may be possible to take preventative measures earlier on, and reduce the burden of ill health caused by obesity in later life.”

He said that it was technically possible to screen people for the ENPP1 variants. However, he did not think it was the most appropriate route to tackle the problem.

Instead, he said it would be better to introduce public health measures such as encouraging food and drinks manufacturers to lower the sugar and fat contents in food and encouraging families to do more exercise.

The researchers did not assess how much the genes were to blame for weight gain and metabolic problems as opposed to poor diet or lack of exercise.

However, Dr Froguel said those with a family history of diabetes and obesity should be particularly vigilant with regards to lifestyle.

Dr Angela Wilson of Diabetes UK said: “This research is an important step in helping us unravel the genetics of Type 2 diabetes. We will be following its progress with interest.”

Harry Potter mania

Tuesday, July 19, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/harry-potter-mania.html>

The new Harry Potter book, “The Half-Blood Prince” has sold exceeding well since its release. Almost 9 million copies were sold in the first 24 hours.

Indeed, the book has sold better than two movies released at the same time! It’s an absolutely incredible phenomenon!

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4692093.stm>

Potter book smashes sales records

The new Harry Potter book has beaten sales records on both sides of the Atlantic, selling almost nine million copies in its first 24 hours.

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince sold 6.9 million copies in the US and more than two million copies in the UK, beating all previous Potter records.

The sixth instalment in JK Rowling series was released worldwide in the early hours of Saturday.

The fifth Potter book sold five million copies in 24 hours in the US in 2003.

British publisher Bloomsbury said UK sales for the current book were 13% higher than first day sales of predecessor, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.

Movies outsold

Estimates from Nielsen BookScan revealed 2,009,574 copies of Half-Blood Prince had been sold within 24 hours of release.

US sales of the sixth Harry Potter book have generated more than \$100m (£57m) in revenue across the weekend – more than the combined box office sales of hit films, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory and The Wedding Crashers.

“When a book beats out movies, we’re in great shape,” said Scholastic’s Lisa Holton.

“This is a cause for celebration, not just for Scholastic, but for book lovers everywhere,” she added.

Cooling off to control epilepsy

Thursday, July 21, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/cooling-off-to-control-epilepsy.html>

New Scientist has a very interesting feature article this week looking at a potentially new method of seizure control. It has been noticed that by locally cooling the part of the brain that is “malfunctioning” as the focus of the seizure, it will stop it from firing and quickly abort the seizure. Furthermore, it appears to be fairly harmless as the brain tissue is not harmed by the temporary cooling.

Certainly, for those people suffering from intractable seizures, this may be a very positive step in the future.

Source article

<http://www.newscientist.com/channel/health/mg18725082.000>

Brain-chilling chip to switch off seizures

- 16 July 2005
- From New Scientist Print Edition.
- Daniel Pendick
- Daniel Pendick is a freelance writer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin

JONATHAN is outside, roving the yard at his parents' 6-acre farm in south-east Illinois in an electric golf cart. His mother Judy peers out of the window nervously, reassured when she spots his silhouette against the rolling acres of corn and soybeans beyond. Small-boned and a little on the short side, Jonathan could be mistaken for a skinny high-school kid. In fact he is 30 years old and has rarely been out of his mother's sight. “I told you I was an over-protective mom,” she tells me.

Jonathan has learning disabilities which doctors believe are the result of a stroke he suffered at birth. But the biggest limitation on his life is epilepsy. Seizures strike without warning, turning his limbs rigid as scores of neurons in a small patch of tissue near the surface of his brain fire simultaneously in an electrical frenzy.

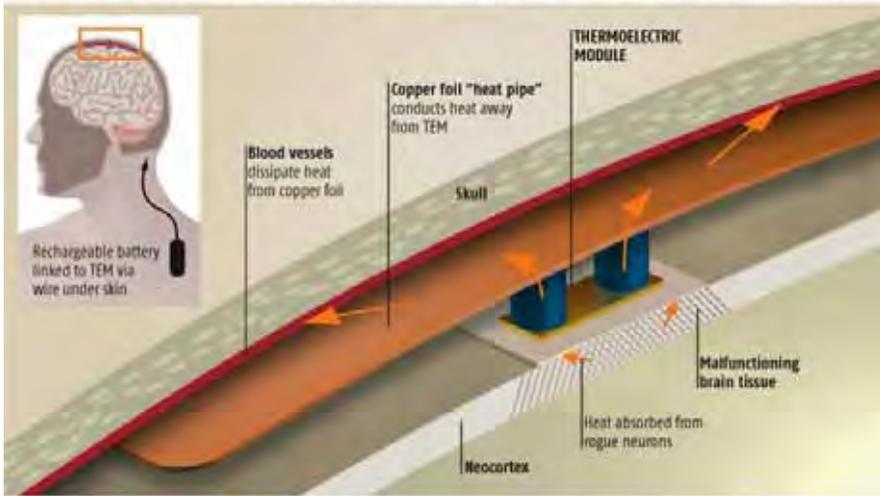
Hope of a surgical cure evaporated in Jonathan's teens. Eventually his doctors found a combination of drugs that cut the frequency of his seizures to three or four a month. But he still lives with the constant threat of a sudden, paralysing attack.

Steven Rothman thinks he may have found a way to liberate people like Jonathan. Rothman, Jonathan's neurologist for nearly 20 years, heads a research group at Washington University in St Louis School of Medicine. In focal epilepsy – the form of the disease that Jonathan suffers from – seizures break out in neurons within a thumbprint-sized portion of the brain. However, cooling these cells down puts them into a state of suspended animation that seems both harmless and completely reversible. So Rothman's idea is to implant a small chip in the skull that detects the start of a seizure and quickly cools the misfiring cells. If it works, the brain-chilling chip will completely douse an electrical storm before it develops, and the patient won't even know it.

Rothman's work was inspired by a practical problem. An estimated 60 million people worldwide suffer from epilepsy. And about two-thirds of them respond well to drugs, meaning most or all of their seizures stop while side effects remain tolerable. It is not known precisely how anti-epilepsy medication works, but it seems to turn down the sensitivity of neurons, preventing errant nerve impulses from sparking an electrical wildfire (New Scientist, 8 May 2004, p 36). And what of the remaining one-third, around 625,000 in the US alone, who do not respond to drugs? Surgeons can sometimes remove the malfunctioning brain tissue and cure the epilepsy in

STOPPING A SEIZURE

The thermoelectric module (TEM) is implanted on the surface of the brain over the neurons responsible for the seizures. Small electrodes on the TEM detect the onset of an attack and switch the device on, cooling the neurons and so preventing a seizure



people who have focal seizures, but this is only possible in a fortunate minority.

Jonathan's seizures began when he was 8 months old, and years of using different anti-epilepsy drugs ensued. "We've tried every kind of medication there is, even some that weren't seizure medications," Judy recalls. She seems unfazed when describing these difficult times, but her composure is shaken when she recalls the disappointment that followed Jonathan's evaluation for surgery at age 16. The doctors found that the focus of his seizures was close to an area that, if damaged, could leave him paralysed. "That was a very emotional, stressful time," she says. "Because when you hope for just a little bit of improvement and you're not going to get anything..."

It is precisely in cases where standard therapies fail, or lead to serious side effects, that Rothman sees the greatest potential for brain cooling. But why cooling?

It turns out that chilling the brain has a long history. Nearly a century ago, German physiologist Wilhelm Trendelenburg applied copper cooling coils to

the brainstem of animals to determine the functions associated with different regions of the brain. Cold seemed to prevent the nerve cells firing. Researchers now think that it interferes with the movement of ions in the cells and prevents the release of chemical neurotransmitters. In fact, neurosurgeons still use cooling to locate abnormal brain tissue.

Rothman realised that to create a useful system he would need a miniature version of Trendelenburg's copper coils that could quickly cool a small area of the brain when a seizure began. The ideal device for this is a thermoelectric module (TEM). This consists of two columns of bismuth telluride semiconductor, one n-type and one p-type, sandwiched between a pair of electrodes to create a circuit (see Diagram). An electrical current flowing through the device creates a difference in temperature between one electrode and the other. This is known as the Peltier effect. The result is that the module gets hot on one side and cold on the other. To improve the module's efficiency, the hot side is usually joined to a ribbed metal heat sink that radiates the energy away from the unit. TEMs are already used widely, on satellites, for example, to remove heat that could disturb infrared sensors, and in laptop computers where they draw heat away from processor chips.

In 1998, Rothman and his collaborators at Washington University in St Louis and other institutions began to explore cooling in slices of living tissue extracted from rat brains. The team fashioned a simple cooling system consisting of a TEM with a cooling surface of about 1 square centimetre and a copper cylinder attached to the hot side to conduct heat away.

They applied a drop of a chemical called 4-aminopyridine to the rat tissue to simulate the seizures. The chemical, which is widely used in lab studies to induce seizures that mimic epilepsy, makes neurons fire rapidly and in synchrony. Then the researchers positioned the cooling chip against the tissue and switched on the current. Cooling the cells from normal body temperature – about 37 °C – to around 22 °C quickly stopped the seizures.

Next the researchers ran similar experiments on live, anaesthetised rats and then on a small number of conscious rats. In all cases the seizures halted.

Their studies established a couple of important facts: just a moderate degree of cooling can stop seizures, and cooling does not appear to harm brain cells. Even temperatures as low as 5 °C seem to cause no permanent physical damage. After 30 minutes or more at low temperature you see some swelling, Rothman says, but that seems to disappear when the cooling is switched off.

So why does cooling work? Rothman suspects that cooling shuts off the release of neurotransmitters – effectively snipping the wires in the neuronal circuits that make them susceptible to seizures.

Now he wants to perform further work to confirm these findings, in particular on monkeys or other primates. At the same time he is searching for ways to overcome the remaining technical hurdles to building a practical, implantable cooling device.

One problem is finding a way to get the heat released by the TEM out of the brain. Brains don't tolerate heat well, as anyone who has ever endured a high fever will confirm. Raising the temperature of the cortex by just 0.5 °C can cause damage.

In a working device the cooling chip would sit on the surface of the neocortex – the thin, intricately folded outer layer of the brain where seizures occur. The brain is wrapped in three protective membranes, the outermost being the pia mater. The cooling chip need not breach this outer membrane, Rothman says. "Seizures may propagate deeper, but the actual tissue that generates the seizure may be near the surface."

The hot side of the chip would sit just a few millimetres away from the surface of the brain. Here it would be close to the dense network of blood vessels on the underside of the skull that can quickly remove the heat.

To make the process more efficient, the heat extracted from the TEM should be spread over a large area. “That requires a very, very good heat conductor,” says Bud Peterson, an engineer at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, who is working with Rothman to develop this technology.

Peterson and his team have created the perfect “heat pipe”: it is a flexible copper foil that can be attached to the hot side of the TEM. It consists of two thin sheets of copper foil connected by internal pillars and sealed at the edges. A small amount of water is trapped inside. Its interior is coated with a material made from powdered copper sintered together into a sponge-like matrix. Heat on the side of the foil in contact with the TEM vaporises the water. The vapour spreads outwards and condenses on the opposite side of the foil, releasing the heat, which is carried off by blood vessels. The sintered powder then acts as a wick to draw the liquid water back to the hot side of the foil. The researchers estimate that a piece of foil about the size of a business card should be enough to cool a small TEM.

Another challenge is to supply enough current to the module. Today’s TEMs require plenty of power, and typically need 1 amp of current. Fortunately, the cooling chip would not have to be triggered very often or for very long. “Even in the worst cases, people seldom have seizures more than two or three times per week,” Rothman says. “The device would be on for seconds to a minute per day.” Best of all, the TEMs might not even need to cool brain tissue down to as low as 20 °C to stop seizures. “If that’s the case, there would be less power consumption and even less heat production from the device,” he says.

At the same time researchers are developing a new generation of more efficient thermoelectric materials. An alloy based on antimony, lead, silver

and tellurium, for example, can remove the same amount of heat as bismuth telluride, but uses half the power (New Scientist, 4 September 2004, p 34). The computer industry, which uses the same technology to cool chips, is funding research into TEMs that use less energy, are more compact and which get rid of heat very quickly. “It is a real plus for us,” says Rothman. “The technology for this keeps getting better.”

Rothman reckons that in less than five years it will be possible to produce a practical, implantable cooling device to tackle focal epilepsy. After all, he says, the technology already exists to automatically detect seizures and switch on implanted devices to stop them. A California-based company called NeuroPace has started clinical trials of a device that extinguishes some forms of focal seizures using electrical impulses from a stimulator implanted in the skull. Rothman and his team have found they too can spot the fluctuations in electrical activity that signal an imminent seizure by using electrodes attached to an EEG apparatus. A practical device might need just two electrodes attached to the TEM to spot the seizures and to switch on the cooler. In December 2004, scientists from Yamaguchi University in Japan reported that they had shut off seizures in rats using a cooling chip. Rothman also takes heart from the fact that research teams are exploring the other benefits that cooling could bring to medicine (see “Cold comfort”).

Robert Fisher, director of the epilepsy centre at Stanford University, is enthusiastic about Rothman’s work. There are patients for whom this technology will be useful, he says, “but it is also reasonably common for people to have seizures in a wider area, or maybe with two seizure sites”. Additional technologies will be needed to treat these patients, he says.

Shutting down epilepsy this way is certainly an intriguing technical challenge, but that is not what keeps Rothman interested. Someday, he hopes, he will no longer have to tell people like Judy and Jonathan that his palette of therapies has run dry. If Jonathan’s seizures could be completely

extinguished without drugs that have sedative or toxic side effects, the result could be transforming. "He could do other things and not have to be around his house so much under his mother and father's care," Rothman says. Maybe he could even take that golf cart for a spin beyond the yard and start to explore the world on his own.

From issue 2508 of New Scientist magazine, 16 July 2005, page 42

Iraq war civilian death count 25,000

Saturday, July 23, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/iraq-war-civilian-death-count-25000.html>

The British Medical Journal has recently published in its news section an updated civilian death count in the Iraq since the invasion. An approximately 25,000 civilians have been killed with a further 42,000 injured.

The confidence interval for this death count is much tighter than the famous (infamous) one last year in the Lancet. Of worry, the majority of civilian deaths are still from US forces, mostly from bombings I believe.

Source article

25 000 civilians have been killed in Iraq since invasion (News)

BMJ 2005;331:176 (23 July), doi:10.1136/bmj.331.7510.176-a

- Owen Dyer
- London

The number of civilians killed in the Iraq war from the invasion of 20 March 2003 to 19 March this year is 24 865, reports Iraq Body Count, an organisation that keeps track of reported deaths of civilians in Iraq. A further 42 500 civilians were reported wounded.

The report is sure to generate controversy, not least because of its finding that the group responsible for killing the most civilians is the US armed forces and not insurgents or terrorists. The report also shows that the second year of the occupation has seen almost twice as many civilian casualties as the first.

A new report says that the group responsible for killing the most civilians (such as those pictured above) is the US armed forces

Confidence is growing that the true count of violent deaths of civilians is around the 25 000 mark, says John Sloboda, a professor of psychiatry at Keele University, Staffordshire, and co-founder of Iraq Body Count.

He said, “We still hear a lot about the famous and often mis-represented Lancet survey, but the UN development programme produced its 2004 Iraq living conditions survey in May based on a bigger representative sample [21 688 households]. That survey estimated a 95% confidence interval of 18 000 to 29 000 deaths, so we are smack in the middle of that, which is reassuring.

“We are also within the confidence intervals of the Lancet study, which were 8000 to 194 000, so we aren’t actually contradicting them. Moreover, they included non-violent deaths and were counting all cause excess mortality.”

Iraq Body Count’s principal method is to record all deaths that have been independently reported by two trusted sources, mostly Western media. But because the collapse in security has increasingly confined Western journalists to the protected “green zone,” the group has come to rely more on Iraqi journalists and particularly on Iraqi government sources, said Professor Sloboda.

Dark chocolate for hypertension

Sunday, July 24, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/dark-chocolate-for-hypertension.html>

An American group has done a quite a good study looking a dark chocolate and hypertension. It has been known for quite a long time that flavonoid-rich foods were probably beneficial from a cardiovascular point of view but this was the first study that looked at dark chocolate specifically.

Their results? For the group that ate 100 g of a specially formulated dark chocolate daily, there was on average a 12 mmHg decrease in the systolic blood pressure and a 9 mmHg decrease in the diastolic blood pressure. A cross-over arm had white chocolate (which has all the ingredients of dark chocolate but none of the flavonoids) and this group had none of the cardiovascular benefits.

These results are almost as good as many anti-hypertensive medications! However, it should be noted that most people eat milk chocolate rather than dark chocolate and milk chocolate has a much lower content of flavonoids.

Source article

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/newsitems/200507/s1417573.htm>

Blood pressure provides new reason to eat chocolate

Dark chocolate can not only soothe your soul but also lower blood pressure, researchers report.

A study published by the American Heart Association joins a growing body of research that show compounds found in dark chocolate called flavonoids can help the blood vessels work more smoothly, perhaps reducing the risk of heart disease.

“Previous studies suggest flavonoid-rich foods, including fruits, vegetables, tea, red wine and chocolate, might offer cardiovascular benefits but this is one of the first clinical trials to look specifically at dark chocolate’s effect on lowering blood pressure among people with hypertension,” said Jeffrey Blumberg of Tufts University in Boston, who led the study.

“This study is not about eating more chocolate. It suggests that cocoa flavonoids appear to have benefits on vascular function and glucose sensitivity.”

Scientists are far from being able to make specific recommendations for patients based on their research on chocolate, and nutritionists have urged people to be cautious because chocolate is high in fat, sugar and calories.

Mr Blumberg and colleagues at the University of L’Aquila in Italy studied 10 men and 10 women with high blood pressure.

For 15 days, half ate a daily 100 gram bar of specially formulated, flavonoid-rich dark chocolate, while the other half ate the same amount of white chocolate.

Then each group “crossed over” and ate the other chocolate.

“White chocolate, which has no flavonoids, was the perfect control food because it contains all the other ingredients and calories found in dark chocolate,” Mr Blumberg said.

“It’s important to note that the dark chocolate we used had a high level of flavonoids, giving it a slightly bittersweet taste. Most Americans eat milk chocolate, which has a low amount of these compounds.”

Writing in the journal *Hypertension*, Mr Blumberg’s team said when the volunteers ate the special dark chocolate, they had a 12 millimetre Hg decrease in systolic blood pressure (the top number in a blood pressure reading) and a nine-millimetre Hg decrease in diastolic blood pressure (the bottom number) on average.

Blood pressure did not change when the volunteers ate white chocolate.

“This is not only a statistically significant effect, but it’s also a clinically meaningful decline,” Mr Blumberg said.

“This is the kind of reduction in blood pressure often found with other healthful dietary interventions.”

Eating dark chocolate also seemed to improve how the body used insulin, and reduced low density lipoprotein (LDL) or “bad” cholesterol by about 10 per cent on average.

“The findings do not suggest that people with high blood pressure should eat lots of dark chocolate in lieu of other important blood pressure-reduction methods, such as medication and exercise,” Mr Blumberg said.

“Rather, we are identifying specific flavonoids that can have a benefit on blood pressure and insulin sensitivity.”

British police kill innocent man in anti-terror action

Sunday, July 24, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/british-police-kill-innocent-man-in.html>



Innocent man shot five times in the head by police

British police have admitted that the Brazilian man they chased then forced to the ground and shot five times in the head was not in any way connected to the terrorist bombings.

The very fact that British police have now resorted to this “shoot first ask questions later” tactic should be very worrying to the British public. Former police chief John Stevens defends the actions and claims:

“I sent teams to Israel and other countries hit by suicide bombers where we learned a terrible truth,” he wrote in the News of the World.

“There is only one sure way to stop a suicide bomber determined to fulfil his mission – destroy his brain instantly, utterly. That means shooting him with devastating power in the head, killing him immediately.”

I take a slightly different view upon this. The Israeli's have had this policy for years. And frankly, I think that it has clearly been shown that it does not work. Suicide bombers are hardly afraid of being killed and would most certainly avoid confronting police or other law enforcement in the first place. Furthermore, that the Israeli's "shoot to kill" have been monumentally ineffective in stopping suicide bombers. Not to mention that the "accuracy" of their aim has been somewhat lacking – more often than not shooting innocent civilians caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/police-kill-innocent-man-in-probe-blunder/2005/07/24/1121539197926.html>

Police kill innocent man in probe blunder

British police hunting London bombers admitted killing a Brazilian man by mistake – a blunder that dealt a blow to their efforts to track down militants they fear could strike again.

Police expressed regret for the tragedy and named the innocent victim as Jean Charles de Menezes, a 27-year-old electrician who had been living in London for three years.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim demanded clarification from Britain about the shooting.

The victim's cousin, Aleide de Menezes, said: "It's an injustice, something needs to be done."

She said her cousin spoke English very well and would have understood police instructions very well, CBN radio reported.

Another cousin, Alex Alves, told Globo television: "He does not have a past that would make him run [from police]."

Alves said his cousin had lived in London legally for three years and was heading to his job when he was killed. Menezes was an electrician, he said.

Menezes was from the Brazilian south-eastern state of Minas Gerais.

The victim caught a bus to Stockwell Tube where he was challenged by officers, who told him to stop. The man then bolted down an escalator, according to witnesses.

It appears he tried to board a train before being shot five times in the head by an officer with an automatic pistol.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair had said that the shooting was "directly linked" to anti-terror operations.

However, Scotland Yard said last night: "We are now satisfied that he [the man] was not connected with the incidents of Thursday, July 21, 2005."

The Metropolitan Police said an inquest would be opened and adjourned into his death, which they described as a "tragedy".

In another dramatic twist to the massive manhunt, police believe they may have established links between the teams of bombers who struck London twice.

Thursday's attempted attacks came two weeks after 56 people were killed in similar attacks.

Security experts said police had clearly adopted a "shoot-to-kill" policy in confronting suspected bombers.

Anti-terrorism expert Robert Ayers of the Royal Institute of International Affairs said police have "demonstrated that they are operating on the premise right now that if they suspect that someone is a bomber, and that the public is going to be endangered by him, they have shoot-to-kill orders".

Massoud Shadjareh of the Islamic Human Rights Commission said the killing was a direct consequence of British police officers being sent to Israel to receive training on how to prevent suicide bombings.

"To give licence to people to shoot to kill just like that, on the basis of suspicion, is very frightening," Azzam Tamimi of the Muslim Association of Britain said.

But former London police chief John Stevens defended the tactics.

"I sent teams to Israel and other countries hit by suicide bombers where we learned a terrible truth," he wrote in the News of the World.

"There is only one sure way to stop a suicide bomber determined to fulfil his mission – destroy his brain instantly, utterly. That means shooting him with devastating power in the head, killing him immediately."

And London's Mayor Ken Livingstone said police had done "what they believed necessary to protect the lives of the public".

Britain's Sunday newspapers agreed that however tragic the outcome it was difficult to blame police for taking the action they did.

If a suicide bomber is merely wounded “he can massacre in his final seconds of consciousness”, the Mail on Sunday noted in its editorial.

“In the London of July 2005, few would want the police to take any chances.

“And bear in mind that if the Stockwell suspect had been wearing a suicide belt, the officers who shot him would be lauded as heroes and loaded with medals, as well as the thanks of a grateful public.”

In one of the biggest police probes in British criminal history, security sources indicated there could be links between the two London attacks.

The sources, cited by British media, said two of the July 7 bombers attended a whitewater rafting trip at the same centre in Wales as some of the July 21 bombers.

This was based on evidence discovered in rucksacks left behind by the failed bombers. Detectives believe the trip could have been used as a bonding exercise.

Meanwhile, police said almost 500 people had called them after they released security camera images of the four suspected bombers.

Additionally, officers raided an apartment in the Streatham area of south London, not far from Stockwell.

The Abu Hafs al Masri Brigade, an al-Qaeda linked group, has claimed responsibility for Thursday’s bombing attempts and those of July 7, but the group’s claims of responsibility for previous attacks in Europe have been discredited by security experts.

Agencies

Hormone useful for weight loss

Monday, July 25, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/hormone-useful-for-weight-loss.html>

Creating a drug that will induce weight loss without nasty side-effects has somewhat been a “holy grail” for many drug companies. Considering the huge problems with obesity in the Western world, the market for such a drug would be huge.

Over the past decade, our understanding into the hormonal control of hunger and satiety and obesity has improved substantially. However, drugs which seemed to work wonders on mice did not seem to work on humans. However, a small study looking at a hormone produced by the small intestine called “oxyntomodulin” seemed to work well. Compared to the placebo group, the oxyntomodulin group lost 2.3 kg (2.4% of body weight) on average in 4 weeks.

A fairly small decrease to be sure, but interesting that it worked at all. The race now would be to produce a tablet form of this hormone.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7715&feedId=online-news_rss20

Hormone jab naturally reduces appetite

- 00:01 25 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Rowan Hooper

A hormone jab may offer burger lovers and the obese a way of reducing their appetites like the turn of a dial. A team at Imperial College London, UK, have found a natural hormone that boosts the stomach's "full" signal.

The hormone is oxyntomodulin, a peptide produced by the small intestine after a meal. In a trial, a group of 14 obese and overweight subjects self-administered doses of the hormone 30 minutes before breakfast, lunch and dinner. After four weeks they had lost an average 2.3 kilograms compared with a control group. The loss amounted to on average 2.4% of body weight.

"By giving the overweight subject oxyntomodulin we are fooling the brain, in a very natural way, into thinking it has just eaten a meal and is no longer hungry," says Steve Bloom, who led the trials.

The researchers also found that the daily energy-intake by the test group was reduced by an average of 170 kilocalories after the first injection, to 250 kcal per day at the end of four weeks. The average recommended intake is 2500 kcal per day for men and 1940 kcal for women.

The test subjects' leptin levels – a hormone responsible for regulating the body's energy expenditure – were also reduced. The researchers also found a reduction in the levels of adipose hormones. These hormones normally encourage the build up of adipose tissues – where fat cells are stored.

Broad brain effects

Now a spin-off company is developing an analogue of the hormone and a "patient friendly" oral preparation, thus avoiding the need for self-injecting. It will be some years before anything is widely available, however.

Any treatment can hardly come soon enough, says Bloom. The health effects of obesity kill over 1000 people every week in the UK alone. In the US, over 65% of adults are overweight.

Bloom says that there were no significant side effects to the hormone injection during the trial and that patients did not develop tolerance to the effects of the hormone. Drugs currently being developed to combat obesity have broad effects on the brain so are more likely to have unwanted side effects, he adds.

“The big thing is that you have had an oxyntomodulin administration from your own gut switching off your hunger after a meal every day of life,” says Bloom. “This is the way you normally lose your appetite after a meal.”

He presented his findings at a meeting of the Physiology Society in Bristol, UK, on Friday.

Journal reference: Diabetes (DOI: 54.08.05.db05-0480)

Cats cannot taste sugar

Friday, July 29, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/07/cats-cannot-taste-sugar.html>

New Scientist had a bit of interesting trivia earlier in the week. Apparently, cats don't have a functioning sweet taste receptor and hence, are unable to taste "sweet" things.

However, they apparently have "very complex amino acid taste receptors" so meat may well taste very different to cats compared to us.

Source article

Why cats prefer meats to sweets

- 13:49 25 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

As cat owners know, their feline friend would much rather chase and eat a live mouse than snack on the chocolate equivalent, and now researchers have discovered the reason – cats are simply unable to taste sweet things.

An examination of feline genetics has shown a significant defect in one of the genes that codes for part of the sweet taste receptor. This "huge deletion" of 247 base pairs in the gene that codes for the T1R2 protein – one of two proteins that make up the sweet taste receptor in mammals – has left cats unable to detect sweet-tasting compounds like sugars and carbohydrates.

It explains the indifference that domestic cats, lions, tigers, leopards and jaguars have been reported to show towards sweet foods. And it may also explain why they have evolved into such accomplished hunters, says Joseph

Brand, professor of biophysics at Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia, US, and one of the study's authors. "But it could be the other way around," he suggests. "What came first: carnivorous behaviour or the loss of the T1R2 protein? With regard to the gene, is this a case of use it or lose it?" he asks.

Gene hunter

Looking down the family tree may provide clues. Brand has also found the mutant gene in cheetahs and tigers, and in their more distant relation, the hyena. So, although it seems clear that an ancestor of the big cats and the hyena must have possessed the faulty gene, Brand does not know on which branch of the evolutionary tree it first occurred. "Almost certainly the ancestral mammal would have been a successful hunter, or it would not have survived losing its sweet taste bud.

"And losing it may well have given wild cats a certain food niche that other animals can't get into – most other animals need to hunt in packs, but big cats have developed the strength to hunt alone," Brand told New Scientist. "But it's a hard way of getting nutrition: they must hunt it, eat it, remove the nitrogen and only then can they use it."

Carnivores' diets are much less efficient than the omnivorous diets of many other large mammals, although parts of a hunted animal do contain carbohydrate – especially the liver – so it is possible that cats may be able to metabolise these energy stores.

Violent reaction

Coupled with the loss of sweet taste receptors in cats is a deficiency of sucrase in cats – the enzyme that digests sucrose. A consequence of this can be seen in cats that accidentally drink water containing sucrose. This makes them violently ill, but, since they cannot taste the sugar, they are unable to develop an aversion and so often drink more of the liquid, with the same results.

The mouth is not the only place where taste buds occur, Brand says. They also exist in the digestive tract and pancreas, where the sweet tasting receptors are also defective. Since the role of taste buds in places other than the mouth is unknown, the consequence of defective ones is also unclear, he says.

But, cats may be compensating for their lack of a sweet tooth. “Felines have very complex amino acid taste receptors. We have no idea what meats taste like to a cat: they may have sophisticated receptors to other taste stimuli that we just don’t know about,” Brand says.

“Our results account for the common observation that the cat lives in a different sensory world to the cat owner,” comments team member Véronique Legrand-Defretin, director of the global feeding behaviour research programme at the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition in Leicestershire, UK.

Journal reference: Public Library of Science Genetics (DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgen.0010003)

New planet discovered!

Saturday, July 30, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/07/new-planet-discovered.html>

There has been some amazing news in the past two days. A new “planet” near the size of Pluto has been discovered! Although it was initially thought that it may be up to twice the size of Pluto, it is now believed to be approximately 70% the size. Furthermore, it has been confirmed that this new object has a moon!

The new object has been temporarily named 2003 EL61 by one group and 2003 UB313 by another.

The discovery of 2003 EL61 is sure to rekindle the debate among astronomers on what you would consider to be a planet. The previously discovered Kuiper belt objects Sedna and Quaoar are both near the size of Pluto and many have argued that if Pluto is to be considered a planet, these large Kuiper belt objects should be as well.

Source articles

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7751&feedId=online-news_rss20

New world found in outer solar system

- 12:16 29 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Maggie McKee

Astronomical detective work led to the stunning discovery of a large new world beyond Pluto – and hiding in plain sight. The object could be the biggest in the Kuiper belt of rocky objects that orbit the outer reaches of the solar system.

The first data made public about the object suggested the object could be up to twice the size of Pluto, but newly revealed observations indicate the object is about 70% Pluto's diameter.

The find suggests more such objects are waiting to be discovered and is likely to reignite the fierce debate about what constitutes a planet.

On Thursday, an email with the subject, "Big TNO discovery, urgent" was sent to a popular astronomy mailing list. The message described the discovery of a "very bright" object that was creeping along slowly beyond the orbit of Neptune – making it a Trans-Neptunian Object, or TNO.

If the reflectivity is as dim as most other distant, rocky objects that have been studied, the object "would be larger than Pluto," Jose-Luis Ortiz, an astronomer at the Sierra Nevada Observatory in Spain, wrote in the email. Pluto is about 2300 kilometres across.

Sleepless night

Ortiz and colleagues discovered the object when they re-analysed observations they had made in 2003. Then, they scoured older archives and found the object in images dating back to 1955.

Based on these so-called "precoveries", they calculated the object's orbit and sent urgent emails asking people around the globe to observe the new find.

Amateur observers Salvador Sanchez, Reiner Stoss, and Jaime Nomen found it on Thursday using a 30-centimetre telescope in Mallorca, Spain. "I am not going to sleep tonight," said Stoss, a mechanical engineering student in

Darmstadt, Germany. “To find an object bigger than Pluto – it’s like the X Prize,” he said, referring to the \$10 million prize for private spaceflight won in 2004.

The observations were then verified by the International Astronomical Union’s Minor Planet Center (MPC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts, US, which designated the object 2003 EL61.

Estimates of the object’s brightness posted by the MPC on Friday at 0027 GMT suggested the object could be as large as twice Pluto’s diameter if it was relatively non-reflective object. In the hours since, another team of astronomers revealed independent data on the object taken with some of the world’s most powerful telescopes. They give the object’s size at about 70% Pluto’s diameter, in line with estimates for a relatively reflective object in the first MPC notice. They say also say the object is orbited by a tiny moon.

Time to move

The MPC reports the object is about 51 Astronomical Units from the Sun – 1 AU is the distance between the Earth and the Sun. Its orbit brings it comes as close to the Sun as 35 AU, while Pluto maintains an average distance of about 39 AU. “Someone should have found this before,” Brian Marsden, director of the MPC, told New Scientist.

One reason they did not is the object’s speed, suggests Stoss. Many surveys of Near Earth Objects take a trio of images spaced 20 minutes apart to search for telltale movement in relation to background stars.

But 2003 EL61 is too far away to detect its progress in that time. Ortiz’s survey compares images taken a day apart. “They give the object time to move,” Stoss says.

Another reason may be the plane of the object’s orbit, says Tommy Grav, an astronomer at the University of Hawaii in Manoa, US. That plane is tilted by

28° with respect to the orbital plane of most planets, where surveys tend to scan the skies for Near Earth Objects.

Off kilter

2003 EL61 is even more off-kilter than Pluto, which orbits in a plane tilted by 17°. “Pluto was pushed out of the plane of the solar system when Neptune moved outwards” soon after the solar system formed, Grav told New Scientist. “It’s possible this object has suffered something similar.”

The discovery, coupled with other recent finds such as Sedna and Quaoar, suggests other large objects may lurk in the murky region beyond Neptune.

“Some people have claimed we’d never find something as bright as this out there,” says Grav. “But there may be something even further out that’s moving so slowly we haven’t seen it yet.”

And the discovery is likely to revive previous fierce debates about what constitutes a planet and even how astronomical objects are named. “But don’t even start that discussion,” Stoss jokes. He says future observations of the object’s colour and brightness could reveal its true size, shape and rotation period.

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7758&feedId=online-news_rss20

New solar system world has a moon

- 18:01 29 July 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Jeff Hecht

Newly disclosed observations of the giant world revealed on Friday to orbit in the outer solar system show that it has a moon.

But although initial calculations suggested the Kuiper Belt object could be up to twice as big as Pluto, the new data indicates it is about 70% the

diameter of that planet. This makes its size second only to Pluto itself among objects beyond Neptune.

The new object has been temporarily named 2003 EL61 by the Minor Planet Center at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Massachusetts, US, and was first spotted by Jose-Luis Ortiz at the Sierra Nevada Observatory in Spain in 2003. Ortiz's group uncovered observations as far back as 1955, and after additional observations reported its orbit to the Minor Planet Center.

When he first saw how bright the object was, Gareth Williams of the Minor Planet Center could not believe it was as far from the Sun as Ortiz claimed – 51 times further away than the Earth. However, he quickly found two images of the object in the online Digital Sky Survey, and posted it on a confirmation page on the Minor Planet Center's website. Half an hour later, German amateur astronomers announced they had found it where predicted.

But more was to come. After Williams put out a notice of the new object and its orbit the evening of 28 July, Mike Brown of Caltech in California, US, said his group had discovered the same object in 2004 – and in January 2005 had spotted a moon orbiting it using the Keck Observatory in Hawaii.

Mass by moon

The moon is not the first discovered around a Kuiper Belt object, but it is the smallest, only about 1% the mass of 2003 EL61. More importantly, observations of the satellite's 49-day orbit allowed Brown to precisely calculate the masses of both 2003 EL61 and its moon.

Brown's results – posted on his website – show the object is about 32% as massive as Pluto. Assuming its composition is similar, that implies its diameter is about 70% of Pluto's, or about 1600 kilometres. That would

probably make it larger than Sedna, an object beyond the Kuiper Belt discovered earlier by Brown's group.

Brown had not made his findings public because he was waiting for infrared data from the Spitzer Space Telescope, which he could use to calculate how much visible light 2003 EL61 reflected. That would allow him to calculate its size more precisely.

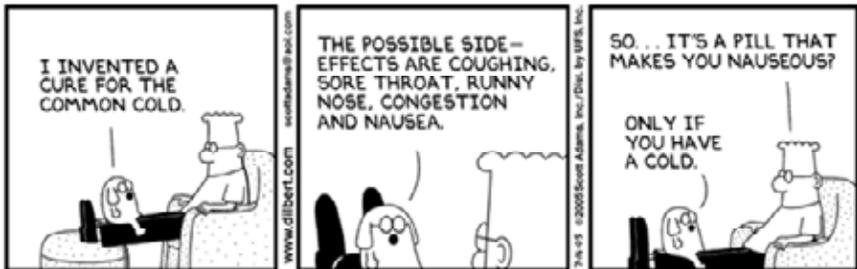
Taking a chance

He finally received that data on 22 July, and is still in process of analysing it. "We could have announced the object earlier, but we took a chance that no one else would find it while we were awaiting our observations" from Spitzer, Brown writes on his web site. "We were wrong," so the Spanish group earned credit for the discovery.

Williams is surprised the object had not been spotted earlier. Although its motion in the sky is very slow: "It's bloody bright," he told New Scientist.

If it was in the main asteroid belt, it would be visible to the unaided eye in a dark sky, one to two magnitudes brighter than Vesta, the brightest object in the main belt. Even far beyond Neptune, it is bright enough for amateur astronomers to have captured images of it without recognising its motion.

August 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Echinacea ineffective for colds

Tuesday, August 02, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/echinacea-ineffective-for-colds.html>

A prospective randomised control trial published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* has shown that taking echinacea prophylactically or at the time of a cold has no significant effect.

First, vitamin C has been scraped off as a treatment and now echinacea. This hasn't been a good year for the alternative health field and the common cold.

Source article

<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/short/353/4/341>

An Evaluation of Echinacea angustifolia in Experimental Rhinovirus Infections

Ronald B. Turner, M.D., Rudolf Bauer, Ph.D., Karin Woelkart, Thomas C. Hulsey, D.Sc., and J. David Gangemi, Ph.D.

Volume 353:341-348, July 28, 2005 Number 4

ABSTRACT

Background

Echinacea has been widely used as an herbal remedy for the common cold, but efficacy studies have produced conflicting results, and there are a variety of echinacea products on the market with different phytochemical compositions. We evaluated the effect of chemically defined extracts from Echinacea angustifolia roots on rhinovirus infection.

Methods

Three preparations of echinacea, with distinct phytochemical profiles, were produced by extraction from E. angustifolia roots with supercritical carbon

dioxide, 60 percent ethanol, or 20 percent ethanol. A total of 437 volunteers were randomly assigned to receive either prophylaxis (beginning seven days before the virus challenge) or treatment (beginning at the time of the challenge) either with one of these preparations or with placebo. The results for 399 volunteers who were challenged with rhinovirus type 39 and observed in a sequestered setting for five days were included in the data analysis.

Results

There were no statistically significant effects of the three echinacea extracts on rates of infection or severity of symptoms. Similarly, there were no significant effects of treatment on the volume of nasal secretions, on polymorphonuclear leukocyte or interleukin-8 concentrations in nasal-lavage specimens, or on quantitative-virus titer.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that extracts of *E. angustifolia* root, either alone or in combination, do not have clinically significant effects on infection with a rhinovirus or on the clinical illness that results from it.

Cannabinoids in inflammatory bowel disease

Tuesday, August 02, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/cannabinoids-in-inflammatory-bowel.html>

Cannabinoids as a group of chemicals seem to have many potentially useful effects. There is exciting research on its use in multiple sclerosis and Alzheimer's disease and now in inflammatory bowel disease (primarily, Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis).

Anecdotally there are reports of people using cannabis in treating a whole host of illnesses, and unfortunately, I think this illicit use has help back research into cannabinoids.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4728605.stm>

Bowel study backs cannabis drugs

Patients with inflammatory bowel disease may benefit from cannabis-based drugs, UK scientists believe.

The Bath University team found people with the gut disorder had an abundant number of a type of cannabinoid receptors in their body.

They believe this is part of the body's attempt to dampen down the inflammation and that giving a drug that binds to these receptors could boost this.

Their findings appear in the journal Gastroenterology.

Cannabinoids

When people have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis – collectively known as inflammatory bowel disease or IBD – their immune system goes into overdrive, producing inflammation in different areas of the digestive tract.

This causes symptoms such as pain and urgent diarrhoea.

Anecdotally, people with IBD who have been users of cannabis have reported that their symptoms get better when they use the drug.

Dr Karen Wright and colleagues examined gut samples from healthy people and IBD patients and looked for the presence of two receptors known to react to natural cannabis-like compounds produced by the body.

Both the patients and the healthy people had similar numbers of CB1 receptors in their gut. However, the IBD patients had far greater numbers of CB2 receptors.

The normal job of CB1 and CB2 receptors is to switch immune responses on or off. CB1 receptors also help to promote wound healing in the lining of the gut.

Potential therapy

Dr Wright said: "This gives us the first evidence that very selective cannabis-derived treatments may be useful as future therapeutic strategies in the treatment of Crohn's and ulcerative colitis.

"This is because some extracts from cannabis, known as cannabinoids, closely resemble molecules that occur naturally in our body, and by developing treatments that target this system, we can help the body recover from some of the effects of these diseases."

She said that the psychoactive effects and the legal implications associated with herbal cannabis use made it unsuitable as a treatment.

However, it might be possible to make a synthetic cannabis-like drug that has all of the therapeutic benefits and none of the other actions of cannabis.

“Targeting drug development to components of the in-built cannabinoid system could be the way forward,” she said.

Dr Derek Scott, a researcher in Biomedical Sciences at Aberdeen University, said: “These initial results look extremely promising and exciting.

More trials

“However, further work is required so that we can better understand exactly how the signalling pathways controlled by cannabinoid receptors might be targeted in IBD patients, and whether there might be any side-effects.”

Cannabis-based medicines are already used for multiple sclerosis in some countries.

Dr John Zycheck, from the Peninsula Medical School in Plymouth, which has been granted £2 million to study these drugs for MS, said: “There is no reason why clinical studies could not be undertaken at a fairly early stage because we are already testing cannabinoids for a variety of different conditions.

“Cannabinoids do have an effect on the gut. It slows gut transit. We see it in our MS patients.”

He said more work was needed to check whether these drugs would reduce inflammation and to work out a dose that was strong enough but not toxic.

Dr George Kunos from the US National Institutes of Health said an alternative approach could involve testing compounds that amplify the action of the body's natural cannabinoids by blocking their normal destruction in the gut.

He said animal studies suggested compounds that block the enzyme fatty acid amidohydrolase (FAAH) do this.

Dr John Bennett, Chairman of Core, a national gut and liver disorders charity, said: "I would not want any patient to think that a cannabis-based treatment for IBD is around the corner. Much more work is needed."

Guantanamo Bay and David Hicks

Wednesday, August 03, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/guantanamo-bay-and-david-hicks.html>

After being held now for about three and a half years, Australian David Hicks is probably going to stand before a military tribunal in the coming weeks. As I have stated before, it is a stain on both the US and Australia to let this charade be held and pretend that it is justice.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/editorial/guantanamo-americas-shame/2005/08/01/1122748578646.html>

Guantanamo: America's shame (editorial)

August 2, 2005

Rigged military tribunals which ensure a guilty verdict, not a fair trial, are the blunt political instruments of authoritarian regimes – not healthy democracies. The US State Department reports annually on the progress or otherwise of human rights around the globe, citing the promotion of freedom and the rule of law as a central goal of American foreign policy. In its latest critique of China, for example, the politicised Chinese legal system is appropriately condemned over the judiciary's lack of independence, the routine lack of due legal process, the violation of prisoners' legal protections and undue political pressure on defence lawyers. Yet the US is in breach of its own fine standards in its treatment of the so-called enemy combatants detained at Guantanamo Bay. New claims that US military tribunals set up to process the accused are stacked to prevent acquittals are a serious stain on the proud American tradition of liberty and the rule of law. For Australia, the only Western nation to allow one of its citizens to go before a US military tribunal, this should be very alarming news.

That the US military tribunal process is flawed is not in itself surprising. The detention without trial of terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba removed hundreds of prisoners from the protections of the US legal system. Washington argues the detainees are illegal enemy combatants, not prisoners of war, and so have forfeited most of their rights. Many legal experts disagree. The Howard Government, however, has accepted that the sole remaining Australian detainee, David Hicks, can be safely tried by a US military panel, although British and European governments sought and secured the repatriation of all their nationals.

Hicks's defence was always going to be extremely difficult to mount from inside the cages of Guantanamo Bay and within the limits of the tribunal system. However leaked emails from two former US military prosecutors suggest there has never been any prospect of a fair trial. The two US officers, since transferred to other duties, say prosecutors were told the panels sitting in judgement on the Guantanamo Bay detainees "would be hand-picked to ensure convictions". That is a serious enough charge. But the two officers also claim the detainees are "low-level" suspects, and the cases against them are marginal.

The Attorney-General, Philip Ruddock, says he will pursue the matter if the US officers' claims are verified. That is the very least he should do. The question is not whether Hicks was reckless and wrong to travel to Afghanistan, where he was arrested at a bus stop in 2001. It is whether Canberra is willing to uphold the right of every Australian citizen to a fair trial. Recent reports suggest Hicks's day before the military tribunal is only weeks away, after more than 3½ years in custody. Mr Ruddock has previously said he expects Hicks to be fairly judged. There may be little public sympathy for Hicks. The toughest test of a democracy, however, is its willingness to uphold the rights of its least popular citizens. Hicks should be properly tried or brought home.

Meet Snuppy

Friday, August 05, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/meet-snuppy.html>



*Clone “father” (left), **Snuppy** (centre), Surrogate mother (right)*

South Korean researchers have successfully cloned the first dog, and the result is “Snuppy”, an Afghan hound. It would seem that cloning techniques and technology has come a long way since “Dolly”, the first mammal cloned from another adult animal. It was only last year that American researchers successfully cloned the domestic cat with the kitten “Little Nicky”.

It seems almost inevitable that sometime in the near future, we will hear the successful cloning of possibly a great ape and soon,

a human. I feel that the ethical questions surrounding this issue has not been well explored by the general community.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7785&feedId=online-news_rss20

World's first canine clone is revealed

- 18:00 03 August 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Rowan Hooper

The world's first cloned dog has been revealed by researchers. South Korea's "king of cloning", Woo Suk Hwang has successfully cloned an Afghan hound.

The breakthrough is bound to lead to excitement among dog lovers who long to clone their dead pets, but Gerald Schatten at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, US, has stern words. "We are not in the business of cloning pets," he says. "We perform nuclear transfer for medical research."

Producing "Snuppy" – or Seoul National University puppy – was not easy. Hwang's team put together 1095 eggs containing the DNA of a three-year-old adult male Afghan, and transferred them into 123 surrogate mothers. Just three pregnancies resulted: one miscarried, and two others went to term. One of the clones died from pneumonia at 22 days old.

"Professor Hwang and his colleagues are to be congratulated on another great success," says Ian Wilmut, creator of Dolly the sheep, at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

Happy families

The team used somatic cell nuclear transfer, the same technique used to create Dolly. To clone Snuppy, the researchers implanted nuclei from his father's ear cells into eggs from female dogs, having removed the eggs' nuclei.

After being zapped with a small electric shock to start development, the embryos were implanted into the uterus of a surrogate mother – in Snuppy's case, a labrador. The team used DNA fingerprinting to confirm that Snuppy was genetically identical to his "father".

Research applications

Successful nuclear transfer in dogs has been elusive until now because it is difficult to get egg cells to mature in the lab. Hwang got around the problem by using naturally ovulated egg cells – those which have naturally been released from the ovaries into the fallopian tubes. Snuppy is the latest mammal to be cloned after sheep, mice, cats, rats, cows, goats, pigs, horses, rabbits and a mule.

There are many research applications for cloning in dogs, says Katrin Hinrichs, of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Texas A&M University, US, who was the first to clone a horse in the US. "There are human diseases for which we have dog models," she says. "It would be of great benefit to have multiple genetically identical animals to study the pathogenesis and treatment of these diseases."

Inherited diseases, for example are a serious problem in purebred dogs. Many, such as malformed hip joints, are influenced by both genetic and environmental factors, and having clones will enable scientists to tease apart these factors.

Dogs in a dish

Schatten, who was part of Hwang's team, says that the cloning of dogs is a step towards the cloning of canine stem cells. Stem cells can currently only be cloned in mice and human cells.

“Once stem cells can be established it may be possible to learn about the genetic basis of traits by studying cells in a dish rather than in the dogs themselves,” he says.

But despite Schatten’s warning, many people are likely to immediately look to the possibility of cloning beloved pets. “I am sure that some people will think that it is worth spending money to have a puppy with a specific genotype,” says Hinrichs.

Why did they choose an Afghan to clone? “Having a distinctive dog means that if we’d [ended up with] a dachshund we’d know that something funny had happened,” says Schatten.

Journal reference: Nature (vol 436, p 641)

Regression evident in the Vatican

Sunday, August 07, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/regression-evident-in-vatican.html>

One of the things I did admire about Pope John Paul II was that an understanding that science and religion can mutually co-exist peacefully was developed. Rather than perpetuating the silliness of ages past with the denial of evident scientific principles, science was accepted and embraced.

Evolutionary theory, which should no longer be controversial was given the green light. However, with the new pope, the resentment of the old anti-Darwinists have come out with support of the nonsense that is “Intellegent Design”. Thank goodness there are still figures within the Church who actually have a scientific education as well.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7801&feedId=online-news_rss20

Creationism rift opens within The Vatican

- 17:50 05 August 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Shaoni Bhattacharya

A deep rift has opened within the Catholic church over the theory of evolution and its compatibility with the Christian faith.

The Vatican's chief astronomer, George Coyne, has rebuffed controversial comments made by Cardinal Christoph Schönborn in The New York Times on 7 July that evolution is incompatible with a belief in God.

“The waters have again been darkened” writes Coyne in the latest issue of the UK Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*. His article follows another flare-up in the debate, when US president George W Bush commented on Monday that schools should teach children about “intelligent design”. Proponents of this idea believe that science can be used to find evidence of a creator’s design in nature.

“I think that part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought,” Bush said. “You’re asking me whether or not people ought to be exposed to different ideas, the answer is yes.”

In his article, Schönborn dismissed as “rather vague and unimportant” a statement made by Pope John Paul II in 1996 which seemed to indicate the church’s acceptance of evolution. “Any system of thought that denies or seeks to explain away the overwhelming evidence for design in biology is ideology, not science,” Schönborn wrote.

But Coyne, a Jesuit priest from the US, slammed these comments. He writes that the “nagging fear” that a universe explained by scientific concepts “escapes God’s dominion” is “groundless”.

He calls for an extensive dialogue. “But we should not close off the dialogue and darken the already murky waters by fearing that God will be abandoned if we embrace the best of modern science,” he urges.

60th anniversary of atomic bombing of Hiroshima

Sunday, August 07, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/60th-anniversary-of-atomic-bombing-of.html>



Hiroshima after the atomic bombing

Yesterday (6th August 2005) was the sixtieth anniversary of the American use of an atomic bomb against the Japanese city of Hiroshima. This event above all else directly led to the end of the Second World War.

There have been many opinions regarding the first and only use of an atomic weapon. Although the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki undoubtedly expedited the cessation of hostilities, there is more than a slight “revisionist” historical view on the part of the victors. The atomic bombs killed at least 120,000 people, the vast majority of them civilians, immediately and

that much again over time. No matter how you look at it, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were war crimes.

Source article

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atomic_bombings_of_Hiroshima_and_Nagasaki

Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Opposition to use of atomic bombs

The Manhattan Project had originally been conceived as a counter to Nazi Germany's atomic bomb program, and with the defeat of Germany, several scientists working on the project felt that the United States should not be the first to use such weapons. One of the prominent critics of the bombings was Albert Einstein. Leo Szilard, a scientist who played a major role in the development of the atomic bomb, argued:

“If the Germans had dropped atomic bombs on cities instead of us, we would have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities as a war crime, and we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them.”

Their use has been called barbaric as several hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed, and the choice of areas heavily populated by civilians. In the days just before their use, many scientists (including American nuclear physicist Edward Teller) argued that the destructive power of the bomb could have been demonstrated without the taking of lives.

It has been argued that the use of atomic weapons against civilian populations on a large scale is a crime against humanity and a war crime. The use of poisonous weapons (due to the effects of the radiation) were defined as war crimes by international law of the time. Some have argued that Americans should have done more research into the effects of the bomb, including radiation sickness and the terrible burns that followed the explosion.

Some have claimed that the Japanese were already essentially defeated, and therefore use of the bombs was unnecessary. General Dwight D. Eisenhower so advised the Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, in July of 1945. The highest-ranking officer in the Pacific Theater, General Douglas MacArthur, was not consulted beforehand, but said afterward that there was no military justification for the bombings. The same opinion was expressed by Fleet Admiral William Leahy (the Chief of Staff to the President), General Carl Spaatz (commander of the U.S. Strategic Air Forces in the Pacific), and Brigadier General Carter Clarke (the military intelligence officer who prepared intercepted Japanese cables for U.S. officials); Major General Curtis LeMay; and Admiral Ernest King, U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, and Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet.

Eisenhower wrote in his memoir *The White House Years*:

“In 1945 Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent reasons to question the wisdom of such an act? During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment, was I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. (pg. 312-313)”

MacArthur believed the dropping of the bombs to be “completely unnecessary from a military point of view. (pg. 775)”

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, after interviewing hundreds of Japanese civilian and military leaders after Japan surrendered, reported:

“Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey’s opinion that certainly

prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”

The rise of fake medicines

Friday, August 12, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/rise-of-fake-medicines.html>

The World Health Organisation estimates that 5 to 8 percent of all pharmaceuticals sold are counterfeits. This is really quite frightening as the “fake” drugs may not have the correct dose, may not have any active ingredient at all or even have another substance. For the world of organised crime, pharmaceuticals are a soft target. Unlike illicit drugs, pharmaceuticals themselves are not illegal. In many parts of the world, the need for modern drugs is great, but the real thing is often very expensive; perfect in the mind of the counterfeiter.

Source Article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/a-bitter-pill-to-swallow/2005/08/11/1123353417325.html>

A bitter pill to swallow

August 11, 2005

Bogus medicines can have tragic consequences, writes Ben Hirschler.

First it was fake CDs, jeans and Rolex watches. Now organised criminals are turning to counterfeit medicines as the latest money-spinner – with potentially lethal results.

Around the world, health authorities are battling a growing trade in fake medicines, which the World Health Organisation estimates is worth more than \$US30 billion (\$39 billion) a year.

The problem is acute in parts of Asia and Africa, where fake drugs are rife, but rich countries are not immune. Just last week, British authorities admitted a third breach of the country's legitimate supply chain in a year, when fake packs of Pfizer's cholesterol fighter, Lipitor, the world's top-selling prescription medicine, were seized. Such cases of fake drugs turning up on pharmacy shelves are only the tip of the iceberg, however.

Most bogus pills are distributed illicitly, often over the internet, exposing patients on every continent to medicines that may contain the incorrect dose, the wrong ingredients or no active ingredients at all. Given the low production costs, it is a hugely lucrative trade and some criminals now prefer it to narcotics, according to government and pharmaceutical industry officials.

For Nimo Ahmed, head of medicines intelligence at Britain's Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency, raids on illicit distributors have become routine.

Earlier last month, officers from his agency seized thousands of pills of Kamagra, a fake version of Viagra made in India, from premises in the southern England towns of Brighton and Chichester. Last November they closed down a factory in London that was churning out half a million fake Valium, Viagra and steroid pills every day.

"Unfortunately, the increase in lifestyle medicines has created a demand on the illicit supply chain and people are increasingly buying these products, often in association with hard drugs," Ahmed said.

His experience is echoed across Europe and the United States. The US Food and Drug Administration last year initiated 58 counterfeit medicine investigations, up from 30 in 2003 and just six in 2000.

The problem is most serious, however, in Asia – where many fake drugs are manufactured – and in Africa, where poverty and slack oversight have created a breeding ground for bogus pharmaceuticals.

Worldwide, WHO believes counterfeits make up between 5 and 8 per cent of the \$US550 billion of medicines sold each year. But a WHO spokeswoman, Daniela Bagozzi, said this was based on incomplete information and the actual amount could be higher.

“It represents a huge number of people who are suffering and in some cases dying,” she said. “A lot of deaths could be avoided if the drugs being taken were not substandard counterfeits.”

The WHO estimates that 60 per cent of counterfeit medicine cases occur in developing countries, with anti-malarials, antibiotics and AIDS drugs all targeted.

Reuters

Super cute baby panda!

Friday, August 12, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/super-cute-baby-panda.html>

Awww!!



New life ... a researcher holds on to a newborn male panda cub in an incubator at the Shaanxi Wild Animal Rescue and Research Center in Xian, central Chin's Shaanxi province.

Photo: AFP

The US Government continues to hide Abu Graib

Sunday, August 14, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/us-government-continues-to-hide-abu.html>

The behaviour by some American soldiers at Abu Graib are a disgrace to the United States, a disgrace to the Western coalition and a disgrace to humanity. Although a few low ranking officers have been made scapegoats to take the blame, the US government continues to minimalise the seriousness of these crimes.

In a recent article in BBC News, it has been reported that the US government is trying to stop further images and videos of prisoner abuse be made available to the public. The claim is that terrorist groups would use these images in their “propaganda mill”. However, I think that the real agenda is that having these images in the public is inconvenient to their “propaganda mill”, that these actions were the isolated acts of a few “bad” soldiers who have already been punished.

As per retired US army colonel, Michael Pheneger,

“The first step to abandoning practices that are repugnant to our laws and national ideals is to bring them into the sunshine and assign accountability”

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4149840.stm>

US fights fresh Abu Ghraib images

The US government is trying to stop fresh images of prisoner abuse in Iraq being made public, claiming they will aid the insurgency, court papers show.

US civil liberties groups have launched a lawsuit to force the release of 87 pictures and four videos showing abuse at Abu Ghraib jail in Baghdad.

Earlier images sparked worldwide condemnation and resulted in charges against a number of soldiers.

The US argues the rest should stay hidden to avoid helping the insurgents.

It is “probable that al-Qaeda and other groups will seize upon these images and videos as grist for their propaganda mill,” the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, Gen Richard Myers, argues in court papers.

Releasing the images could also incite violence against US troops, he says.

And he says the images would be detrimental to the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gen Myers’ arguments were contained in court documents filed on 21 July but only recently unsealed.

The Pentagon stepped up its campaign with a later request, submitted on Friday, for certain material to be kept from the public domain.

‘Accountability’

The civil liberties groups have submitted counter-arguments by a retired US army colonel, Michael Pheneger, who insists the public good would be served by publication of the images.

“The first step to abandoning practices that are repugnant to our laws and national ideals is to bring them into the sunshine and assign accountability,” he wrote.

He also argued that the Iraqi insurgency would continue regardless of whether or not the pictures were published.

A district judge, Alvin Hellerstein, will decide whether the images should be released.

The photographs released last year showed Iraqi prisoners being physically and sexually abused or humiliated.

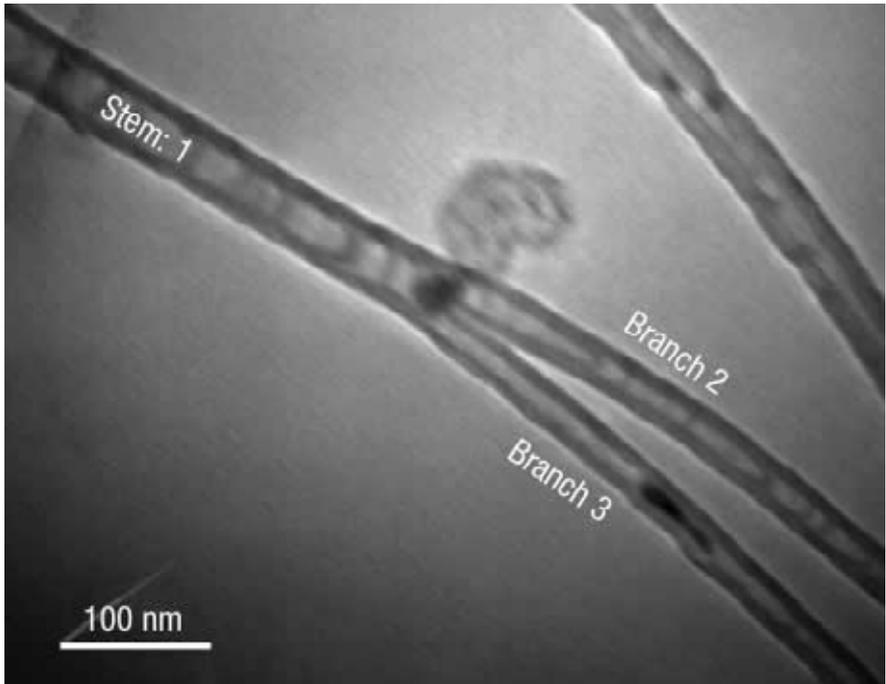
The images at the centre of the fresh legal battle are believed to have been taken by the same soldier as the original set.

All senior US commanders have so far been cleared of any crime.

Y-shaped nanotubes are natural transistors

Tuesday, August 16, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/y-shaped-nanotubes-are-natural.html>



Y-shaped carbon nanotubes

It has been discovered that Y-shaped carbon nanotubes work particularly well as transistors. The importance of this cannot be under-emphasised. It has already been conjectured that the future of electronic circuitry would use carbon nanotubes as conducting “wires”. This revelation, however, makes the concept of a full carbon nanotube based “chip” entirely feasible as the transistor is the key component. Furthermore, it is believed that these nanotube based transistors can scale to a much smaller size than what can easily be achieved with silicon, meaning faster and more powerful computer chips.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7847&feedId=online-news_rss20

Y-shaped nanotubes are ready-made transistors

- 16:14 15 August 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Will Knight

Tiny tubes of carbon, crafted into the shape of a Y, could revolutionise the computer industry, suggests new research.

The work has shown that Y-shaped carbon nanotubes are easily made and act as remarkably efficient electronic transistors – the toggles used to control the flow of electrons through computer circuits.

But the nanotransistors are just a few hundred millionths of a metre in size - roughly 100 times smaller than the components used in today's microprocessors. They could, therefore, be used to create microchips several orders of magnitude more powerful than the ones used in computers today, with no increase in chip size.

Prab Bandaru and colleagues at the University of California in San Diego, and Apparao Rao, of Clemson University in South Carolina, both in the US, started by growing ordinary carbon nanotubes through chemical vapour deposition.

But they added iron-titanium particles to spur the growth of an extra nanotube branch attached to the main stem. The overall structure assumed a Y-shape and the catalyst particles were absorbed into the tubes at the branching point.

Smaller still

Experiments then showed that applying a voltage to the stem of the Y precisely controls the flow of electrons through the other two branches. The switching capacity of these nanostructures is, in comparable to that of today's silicon transistors.

And, whereas current silicon transistors have been shrunk to around 100 nanometres, the Y-shaped nanotubes measure just tens of nanometres in size. Eventually, they could even be shrunk to just a few nanometres, the researchers suggest.

Previous efforts to construct transistors using carbon nanotubes have involved attaching the tubes to larger silicon elements. By contrast, the Y-junction transistors are made entirely from carbon nanotubes.

New era

"The transistor is fully self-contained," Bandaru told New Scientist. "The discovery heralds a new era of nanoelectronics in that functionality can be harnessed using all-carbon devices."

Bandaru says the main remaining worry is how to manufacture complex nanotube-based circuitry reliably. Nonetheless, he is optimistic about the future of nanotube-based electronics.

"One must remember that for the Pentium chips which now have over 500 million transistors, the progenitor was a simple integrated circuit with two transistors in 1958," Bandaru says. "We are probably at the same stage with Y-junctions and the future looks good."

Journal reference Nature Materials (DOI: 10.1038/nmat1450)

Reactive astrocytes may be the cause of epilepsy

Wednesday, August 17, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/reactive-astrocytes-may-be-cause-of.html>

It is generally believed that epilepsy causes the production of abnormal cells called reactive astrocytes but US researchers in New York experimenting on animal models think otherwise. In their model, it appeared that it was the astrocytes that were producing excess glutamate, the chemical that causes neurons to fire wildly which leads to a seizure.

This just goes to show how little we actually know about many neurological diseases, even common ones.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7853&feedId=online-news_rss20

Unsuspected brain cells may cause epilepsy

- 13:30 16 August 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

The roots of epilepsy lie in an often-overlooked type of brain cell and not in the neurons as was previously thought, a new study claims. The US-based researchers hope their findings will lead to more appropriate treatments for the condition.

Epilepsy is a syndrome that arises when a brain chemical, called glutamate, stimulates neurons to start firing wildly and uncontrollably, sometimes resulting in seizures or loss of consciousness. Current treatments are aimed

at slowing down brain function to reduce the neuronal firing, but these have unwelcome side effects, such as drowsiness.

Neurologists generally believe that epilepsy causes the production of abnormal cells called reactive astrocytes – oversized, bloated, star-shaped cells that no longer function properly in their “housekeeping” role of maintaining the brain’s optimum chemical environment.

So Maiken Nedergaard, at the University of Rochester Medical Center, New York, and colleagues decided to take a closer look at the role of astrocytes in epilepsy. The team induced epilepsy in rats using five different known methods, for example lowering the level of brain calcium. They then blocked synaptic activity completely using the neurotoxin tetrodotoxin (TTX), which meant there was no neural firing and therefore no seizures in the rats.

“To our great surprise, we found that there was an increase in reactive astrocytes in all five models, which could not have been caused by over-firing of the neurons as expected – because there had been no neural firing,” says Nedergaard.

“And the reactive astrocytes were producing excessive glutamate in the rats. It turns out that reactive astrocytes trigger epilepsy, and not the other way around,” she concludes.

Hammering away

Astrocytes are a major type of brain cell, but because they are not involved in electrical activity within the brain, they have been studied relatively little.

Donald Weave, president of Epilepsy Canada, agrees. The role of glial cells, the cells that surround and support neurons, in epilepsy and neurology “has been understudied”, he says. “We have been hammering away at the same old approaches for years and so a new way in with astrocyte involvement would be very useful.”

The cell type is found in larger proportion – and with more “points” on the star-shaped cell – in animals with higher brain function. Monkeys have roughly the same number of astrocytes as neurons in their brains, whereas humans have 10 times as many astrocytes as neurons.

Recently, more has been discovered about the importance of these cells and the role they play in diseases, from stroke to Alzheimer's.

Blood to brain

One of the roles of these “housekeeper” cells is to mop up excess glutamate. But Nedergaard reports that when the cells become abnormal, they appear to produce detrimental amounts of the chemical. “We need to find a treatment that controls the release of glutamate or inhibits reactive astrocytes. At the moment, the drugs that could do this are not able to pass the blood-brain barrier,” she says.

“It's very important, because right now we are treating children – who are in education and still learning – with drugs that slow down their synaptic activity and brain function, which is very bad,” she told New Scientist.

The researchers used the rat models to analyse three drugs commonly used to treat epilepsy. They found that in addition to slowing neural firing, the drugs reduced the type of chemical signalling that causes astrocytes to release glutamate. “This may be why they work,” Nedergaard suggests.

Ley Sander, at the UK's National Society for Epilepsy, comments: “This a most interesting study as it suggests that astrocytes may be involved in the initiation and propagation of epileptic discharges. This is, however, based in animal models and it remains to be seen if this is a true reflection of what happens in the human brain at the time of a seizure. If it is, then new avenues for the pharmacological treatment of epilepsy will be opened.”

And a spokesperson from UK-based charity Epilepsy Action, adds: “We welcome any research into epilepsy, particularly research that is related to a cure for epilepsy, as opposed to suppressing seizures.”

Journal reference: Nature Medicine (DOI: 10.1038/nm1277)

Brazilian's death from tragedy to travesty

Wednesday, August 17, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/brazilians-death-from-tragedy-to.html>

ITV News has released details of “secret documents and photographs” from the day when Brazilian electrician, de Menezes, was openly shot to death by British police on a railway station.

Contrary to earlier reports, he was not wearing a padded jacket and nor was he running in the station. Rather, he was completely unaware that he was being tailed.

The blame has been apportioned to a catastrophic failure in the surveillance operation. As always, the fault lies with human intelligence, or lack thereof.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/brazilian-shot-dead-by-uk-police-wrongly-identified/2005/08/17/1123958087666.html>

Brazilian shot dead by UK police ‘wrongly identified’

August 17, 2005 – 6:41AM

The fate of a Brazilian electrician shot dead by British police was sealed the moment he was wrongly identified in a bungled surveillance operation as a possible suicide bomber, ITV News said.

ITV News obtained what it said were secret documents and photographs from the shooting on July 22 of Jean Charles de Menezes, killed the day after four would-be bombers failed in attacks on London’s transport system.

CCTV footage and eyewitness accounts cited by ITV News showed the Brazilian was not wearing a padded jacket and walked calmly through the underground station barriers – contrary to initial reports that he was running and had a bulky jacket that could have concealed a bomb.

Firearms officers had been given clearance to kill de Menezes but, as they sped towards the underground railway station, he apparently seemed completely unaware that he was being tailed, ITV News said.

According to witness accounts and statements made by police officers involved, de Menezes boarded the train and was restrained by a surveillance officer before he was shot eight times.

ITV News said there was a catastrophic failure in the surveillance operation when officers wrongly believed de Menezes could have been one of the failed bombers.

The failed July 21 attacks came two weeks after four British Muslim suicide bombers killed 52 people in attacks on three London trains and a bus.

Police declined to comment on the ITV report while the mistaken killing is still being investigated.

Reuters

The stupidity of US “anti-terror” policy

Wednesday, August 17, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/stupidity-of-us-anti-terror-policy.html>

The US has “no-fly lists” which detail a people who require further scrutiny before boarding a plane. At face value, it appears to be a reasonable and good policy. However, its execution has been little more than a farce. The net is so wide and imprecise that ***babies and infants*** have been disallowed boarding pending the fax of their passports and other documents.

Reality check: one year olds are not likely recruits for Al Qaeda.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/nofly-lists-beyond-a-joke-for-angry-parents/2005/08/16/1123958065088.html>

No-fly lists beyond a joke for angry parents

August 17, 2005

Washington: Infants have been stopped from boarding planes at US airports because their names are the same as or similar to those of possible terrorists on the Government’s “no-fly list”.

It sounds like a joke, but it’s not funny to parents who miss flights while waiting to have babies’ passports and other documents faxed.

Ingrid Sanden’s year-old daughter was stopped in Phoenix before boarding a flight home to Washington at Thanksgiving. “I completely understand people wanting to be safe when they fly,” Mrs Sanden said. “But focusing the target a little bit is probably a better use of resources.”

The Government's lists of people who are either barred from flying or require extra scrutiny before being allowed to board planes ballooned since the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Critics including the American Civil Liberties Union say the Government doesn't provide enough information about the people on the lists, so innocent passengers can be caught up in the security sweep if they happen to have the same name as someone on the lists.

That can happen even if the person happens to be an infant such as Mrs Sanden's daughter. "It was bizarre," Mrs Sanden said. "I was hugely pregnant, and I was like, 'We look really threatening'."

Sarah Zapolsky and her husband had a similar experience last month at Dulles International Airport outside Washington. An airline ticket agent told them their 11-month-old son was on the Government list.

They were able to board their flight after ticket agents took half an hour to fax her son's passport and fill out paperwork.

"I understand that security is important," Ms Zapolsky said. "But if ... we have to give up our passport to prove that our 11-month-old is not a terrorist, it's a waste of their time."

Well-known people such as Senator Edward Kennedy have also been stopped at airports because their names match those on the lists.

Associated Press

Israeli “disengagement” proceeds

Friday, August 19, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/israeli-disengagement-proceeds.html>



Israeli forces storm the roof of a synagogue in the southern Gaza Strip settlement of Kfar Darom. Photo: AFP

The Israelis have carried through with the removal of Jewish settlers and protesters from the two settlements, Neve Dekalima and Kfar Darom, where some of the worst clashes between security forces and opponents have occurred. That being said, the protests have been relatively non-violent. I'm forced to admire Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's resolve in this issue.

IMHO, the Israeli Jews must give up the Palestinian controlled territories which have been illegally occupied for decades. The previous policy of deliberate building of settlements in these territories was offensive and driven by religious ideology.

It remains to be seen what will happen to the rest of the Jewish settlements around Gaza and the West Bank. However, a compromise between the Palestinians and Israelis on land must be reached and Israel still has a long way to go in terms of returning stolen land. With any luck, this will be the first concrete step on the pathway to peace.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/gaza-settlers-dragged-from-synagogue/2005/08/18/1123958181927.html>

Acid and arrests as Gaza evacuation erupts

August 19, 2005 – 8:18AM

Israeli forces cleared the last Jewish settlers and protesters from Gaza resistance strongholds, breaking the back of their opposition to ending nearly four decades of occupation.

The army said it had finished evacuating Neve Dekalim, the biggest settlement, and Kfar Darom, scene of the worst clashes between security forces and opponents of uprooting the first enclaves from land that Palestinians seek for a state.

Yesterday, police used cranes and water cannon to battle protesters on the roof of Kfar Darom's synagogue. They fought back with rocks, paint-filled light bulbs and acid. The army said 31 security personnel were hurt.

Pullout opponents were also dragged kicking and screaming from Neve Dekalim's synagogue after troops moved in.

The latest evacuations brought the number of Gaza's 8,500 settlers evacuated to well over 80 per cent. Hundreds of rightist pullout opponents have also been expelled or detained. The army said 160 were arrested in Kfar Darom.

Israeli opponents call the withdrawal a victory for militants – a view echoed by the gunmen – as well as the betrayal of a biblical claim that could set a precedent elsewhere.

"I am totally exhausted, but it has not been for nothing," said protester Shlomit Binyamin, 17, in Neve Dekalim. "I hope the people of Israel will ensure there will be no more disengagement. We must continue the fight."

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon dubs the pullout "disengagement" from conflict and most Israelis back it. Political analysts say it could also reduce foreign pressure to give up bigger settlements in the West Bank, land the Palestinians also seek.

Housing blocks in Neve Dekalim stood empty of life after the evacuations.

A bicycle lay abandoned, ribbons in the orange protest colour of the settlers tied to its handlebars.

One family struggled to load a 3 metre mango tree, planted when they moved to the settlement at its founding in 1983, aboard an evacuation bus.

The toughest resistance has come largely from young ultranationalists who had slipped into the settlements.

Most of the residents left peacefully after making their protest – and possibly losing a slice of compensation money – by staying beyond an official deadline. Many were carried from their homes weeping in anguish.

Seventeen of 21 Gaza settlements are now clear and officials said all may be empty by Tuesday, far sooner than first thought. Only isolated Netzarim looms as a potential trouble spot. But community leaders said they had agreed to leave on Monday.

Two of four West Bank settlements on the evacuation list are already empty and attention is expected to move quickly to the others. In a sign the protesters have not given up, though, they blocked the road from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv last night.

Palestinians welcome the withdrawal of the 9,000 settlers from Gaza and the West Bank, but fear Israel aims to keep most of the other communities housing 230,000 settlers forever. Some 3.8 million Palestinians live in Gaza and the West Bank.

The White House, which sees the withdrawal as a way to boost peacemaking prospects, praised Israel's pullout yesterday and said it would strengthen ties. Israel seeks \$US2.2 billion (\$A2.93 billion) in aid from its US ally after the withdrawal.

Sharon has said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas must dismantle powerful militant factions before there can be any progress to statehood talks under a US-sponsored "road map".

But militants say the Gaza withdrawal has shown that fighting is the way to take more land from Israel. The army said gunmen injured a soldier lightly in a shooting on Thursday and fired two mortars at the main settlement bloc.

Israel says the pullout will end its occupation of Gaza, but Palestinians say that can only happen once they gain full control of borders and airspace.

Foetal skin for burns

Friday, August 19, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/foetal-skin-for-burns.html>

Swiss scientists have published in the *Lancet* on a technique using cultured foetal skin cells to help treat burns. It appears that this was particularly successful and it avoided the need for a skin graft operation.

There are of course bioethical issues with sourcing foetal tissue (in this case, from aborted foetuses) which haven't really been explored in this particular study.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/skin-from-foetus-is-a-balm-for-burns/2005/08/18/1123958182072.html>

Skin from foetus is a balm for burns

By Julie Robotham Medical Editor

August 19, 2005

Skin taken from an aborted foetus and cultivated in the laboratory has been used in the treatment of eight children who suffered severe burns, allowing them to avoid traumatic skin graft operations.

"In both animals and people, [foetal] skin is very efficient in healing rapidly and without scars," wrote the Swiss scientists who pioneered the technique, in the medical journal *The Lancet*. Foetal skin was better at producing collagen and at stimulating new nerve growth compared with the skin of children or adults, said Patrick Hohlfield, of the University Hospital of Lausanne, who led the project. It was also less likely to trigger rejection reactions.

The cultured foetal skin material was placed on the children's burns, where it acted as a trellis for the growth of their own new skin cells, and was reapplied every three days for up to three weeks.

The wounds healed more rapidly than for traditional treatments and the skin colour was consistent with that of the surrounding skin, the doctors reported. A skin biopsy from one of the girls showed no trace of a Y chromosome – meaning the cells had not grafted to the recipient but had disappeared after her own skin regrowth had begun.

But the director of the West Australian Burns Service, Fiona Wood, expressed caution. "This is an attempt to augment healing using cells that ... are not from the same person, and this can be of concern," said Professor Wood, a surgeon who led the treatment of victims of the Bali bombings. Her team is developing burns treatments techniques using cultures of the patient's own cells. "We believe that is the ultimate to strive for," she said.

The success of the foetal cell technique would probably be dependent on the duration of the pregnancy, said Professor Wood, because healing patterns changed as the foetus grew.

The Swiss doctors said the mother consented to the use of the skin from the 14-week male foetus, but they did not say why the abortion was performed.

A bioethicist, Nicholas Tonti-Filippini, said there was no fundamental ethical problem in using the cells from the dead foetus, provided women were not coerced into abortion to produce such materials. "The issues are to do with whether you create a demand for foetal tissue which then has an effect on abortion [practice]. As long as the use of the tissue is totally separate from the question of that abortion, intrinsically there isn't an ethical issue."

Merck loses Vioxx case – \$US 253.4 million

Saturday, August 20, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/merck-loses-vioxx-case-us-2534-million.html>

Merck, the pharmaceutical company that made the drug rofecoxib (aka Vioxx) which was withdrawn last year over concerns of its cardiovascular safety has had its first lawsuit tested in a Texan court.

Carol Ernst, widow of 59-year-old Robert Ernst sued Merck for his “wrongful” death.

The jury found Merck liable and a staggering \$US 253.4 million was awarded.

Personally, I find this case somewhat disturbing. I have been a strong critic in this blog over the pharmaceutical industry’s handling of various medications and especially of Merck over rofecoxib. Although it is true that rofecoxib increases the risk of fatal and non-fatal myocardial infarction compared to placebo (and other NSAIDs), it would not be entirely fair to say that rofecoxib is the cause of such an event in any single person. Rofecoxib does not cause cardiovascular events in otherwise healthy people.

Thus, I find this finding highly flawed and not based on scientific merit. Furthermore, the large award is nothing but sensationism as it will be docked down even if there is no

challenge to the finding. I feel that on appeal, Merck will almost certainly win the case.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4167784.stm>

US giant punished for faulty drug

US drugs giant Merck has been ordered to pay \$253.4m (£141.07m) to the widow of a man who died from a heart attack blamed on the popular painkiller Vioxx.

A jury in Texas found Merck negligent in the death of 59-year-old Robert Ernst, in the first of 4,200 similar lawsuits worldwide.

Vioxx was withdrawn last year after a study concluded it could double the risk of heart attack or stroke.

The company denies the drug caused Mr Ernst's death and plans to appeal.

The drug is known to have been taken by more than 20 million people worldwide before it was banned. It was used mainly to treat pain from arthritis.

Shares in Merck fell \$2.35 – or 7% – on Friday.

Anguish

Merck has been swamped with lawsuits since it withdrew Vioxx from the market last September following a study which showed it doubled the risk of strokes and heart attacks after 18 months of use.

It has been estimated that Vioxx could have caused 27,785 heart attacks or deaths since it was approved for use in 1999.

More than 4,200 lawsuits have been filed against the firm over the drug.

The Texas jurors made the multi-million dollar award to Mr Ernst's widow, Carol, to cover a combination of his lost pay as a Wal-Mart produce manager, mental anguish, loss of companionship and punitive damages.

When the verdict was read out in Angleton, Texas, Mrs Ernst wept and her lawyer, Mark Lanier shouted "Amen".

Mrs Ernst called the verdict a "wake-up call" for pharmaceutical companies.

"This has been a long road for me," she told reporters afterwards.

"But I felt strongly that this was the road I needed to take so other families wouldn't suffer the same pain I felt at the time."

Mr Lanier said he had pressed for such high damages to make an example of Merck.

"You've got to fine Merck and all Merck knows is money. You have got a company worth billions and billions and billions of dollars – how do you fine them?"

"If you write down \$10m, Merck laughs. It's a rounding error. It's got to be over \$100m or they won't even pay attention."

The BBC's Guto Harri in New York says lawyers preparing similar lawsuits have been heartened by the verdict.

Some analysts believe the company could end up having to pay out \$18bn, he adds.

Evidence 'flawed'

The company said it was disappointed with the verdict in the first case of its kind against Merck over the Vioxx drug.

“We believe that we have strong points to raise on appeal and are hopeful that the appeals process will correct the verdict,” said Merck’s senior vice-president Kenneth C Frazier.

Merck lawyer Jonathan Skidmore added: “There is no reliable scientific evidence that shows Vioxx causes cardiac arrhythmia, which an autopsy showed was the cause of Mr Ernst’s death.”

He said their appeal would focus on what he called “unreliable scientific evidence” presented by the plaintiffs.

“It’ll be based on the fact that we believe unqualified expert testimony was allowed in the case,” he said. “We don’t believe they met their burden of proof.”

The next trial is due to take place next month in New Jersey, Merck’s home state, and the first federal trial will begin in New Orleans in late November.

Moral arguments by statistics

Tuesday, August 23, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/moral-arguments-by-statistics.html>

New Scientist magazine has an excellent opinion piece this week on the use of statistical arguments for moral questions, specifically, for execution. Needless to say, the use of some statistical data as justification is extremely flawed.

To quote verbatim:

“They [Sunstein and Vermeule] argue that the familiar problems with capital punishment – the danger of executing an innocent person, the “irreversibility” of the sentence, the somewhat arbitrary way it is applied, and the fact that it applies to a disproportionate number of African-Americans – do not add up to a valid case against it because the same distortions occur even more acutely with homicide, which capital punishment can help prevent. So let’s get this straight: because homicidal maniacs kill people by mistake, kill them irreversibly, kill them arbitrarily or kill proportionately more African-Americans than whites, then it’s supposed to be OK for the state to emulate them.

This is untenable, and immoral.”

Source article

<http://www.newscientist.com/channel/opinion/mg18725136.000>

Forget the statistics, killing is wrong

- 20 August 2005

- From New Scientist Print Edition.
- Clive Stafford Smith is legal director of Reprieve, a UK charity fighting for people facing the death penalty (see www.reprieve.org.uk)

PROFOUND moral arguments are rarely resolved by statistical proof, and when an academic claims to have done just that I cannot help but raise a sceptical eyebrow. So you can imagine my reaction earlier this year when Cass Sunstein and Adrian Vermeule, two law professors at the University of Chicago, published a paper in which they claimed that the death penalty was “morally obligatory” because it had been proved statistically that it deterred people from committing murder. Each execution, they said, saves 18 lives, so “a refusal to impose the death penalty condemns numerous innocent people to death”.

I have spent more than 20 years representing some 300 men, women and children who faced capital punishment in various US states. I do not think of my clients as statistics. Six of them have died in the execution chamber. Often I have staved off executions only at the last minute. Many of my clients have been innocent: human beings make fallible judges, and no machine has more human parts than the criminal justice system.

I therefore feel strongly that when academics step out of the classroom and into public discourse on this matter they must be held responsible for their actions. And as it turns out, Sunstein and Vermeule should have been a lot more careful before they dished out their verdict.

For a start, they offer nothing in the way of original research. Their paper, “Is Capital Punishment Morally Required?” (AEI-Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies, working paper, March 2005), is a philosophical polemic based on the conclusions of other authors. What’s more, the “wave of recent evidence” suggesting that capital punishment saves lives is little more than a ripple. They base their argument on a 2003 paper by Hashem Dezhbakhsh

and others (American Law and Economics Review, vol 5, p 344), citing it as evidence that each execution saves 18 lives. However, they go on to refer to another study that “proves” each execution saves 14 lives; another proves that only five lives are saved; yet another claims three are saved. Which researchers are we to believe? How would it look if, rather than dealing with life or death, these were financial analysts all promising a profit on an investment but unable to decide whether it would be 3 per cent or 18 per cent? My bet is that you would get nervous about investing.

Still, is deterrence the only issue at hand when considering the morality of the death penalty? Sunstein and Vermeule seem to think so. They argue that the familiar problems with capital punishment – the danger of executing an innocent person, the “irreversibility” of the sentence, the somewhat arbitrary way it is applied, and the fact that it applies to a disproportionate number of African-Americans – do not add up to a valid case against it because the same distortions occur even more acutely with homicide, which capital punishment can help prevent. So let’s get this straight: because homicidal maniacs kill people by mistake, kill them irreversibly, kill them arbitrarily or kill proportionately more African-Americans than whites, then it’s supposed to be OK for the state to emulate them.

This is untenable, and immoral. My African-American, juvenile, mentally disabled client Ryan Matthews was recently exonerated from death row by six DNA tests. He has only one life, and it would have been no consolation to him, had he been executed in error, that some academic pondering the view from his office window thought that his arbitrary death was OK because the murder for which he was falsely convicted was arbitrary too.

The crux of my argument is this: the notion that statistics can solve all the world’s problems is facile.

Sunstein and Vermeule even hint at the absurdity of their “moral obligation” thesis when they apply it to highway safety. In effect, they argue that if it

were proved that a speed limit of 8 kilometres per hour would save 50,000 lives a year on American roads, the government would be morally obligated to impose it – no matter that the average daily commute would take a full 6 hours each way.

What saddens me most about this paper is that Sunstein worked as a clerk for a hero of mine, Thurgood Marshall, who ventured courageously into the South during the dangerous times of the 1950s and early 1960s to defend victims of racial discrimination.

If Sunstein had had the same “real world” experience as Marshall, he might see that there are more sensible approaches than capital punishment to the US’s murder epidemic, such as controlling guns. It seems to have worked in Europe.

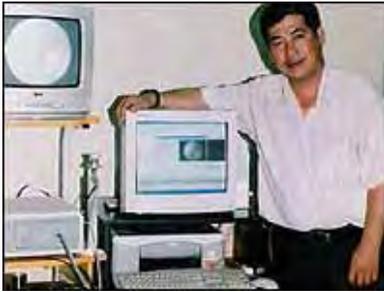
The death penalty is disgusting. I have been there. I have watched my clients die. And I will spend the rest of my life doing my best to make sure it does not happen to individual human beings who I have come to know.

From issue 2513 of New Scientist magazine, 20 August 2005, page 20

DIY doctor makes own endoscope!

Wednesday, August 24, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/diy-doctor-makes-own-endoscope.html>



Dr Huy and his DIY endoscope

Endoscopes allow for minimally invasive procedures to be performed and have been one of the great advances in Surgery in recent times. Unfortunately, as it is a rather technical piece of equipment, endoscopes are extremely expensive. Vietnam is still a developing nation and endoscopes are in short supply.

Proving that “need is the mother of invention”, a hospital doctor in Vietnam has made his own endoscope using a webcam as the imaging device. The whole setup including a Pentium 4 computer and printer cost less than \$US 1000 to make (unlike the usual \$US 30,000 for an endoscope). Fantastic!

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4145984.stm>

Vietnam medic makes DIY endoscope

By Hai Le

BBC Go Digital

A hospital doctor in the poor rural area around the Mekong Delta in Vietnam has used his PC and some cheap parts to create a homemade endoscope.

In Vietnam, there is a shortage of endoscopes, with normally only one in each province.

Endoscopy is a minimally invasive diagnostic procedure used to evaluate the interior surfaces of an organ by inserting a small scope in the body. Through the scope, doctors are able to see lesions.

Dr Nguyen Phuoc Huy said his hospital could never afford to buy one as the endoscope costs around \$30,000.

Instead he spent two years developing a DIY endoscope to peer inside the bodies of patients without the need for surgery.

Low cost system

The scope captures images from the body of a patient, which are then passed through a webcam to an analysis machine.

“The adaptor costs almost nothing because it is simply a system of lens linked to a webcam costing just about \$30.

“In total I had to buy only the scope, which is about \$800,” Dr Huy told the BBC World Service programme Go Digital.

“A Pentium 4 computer with a colour printer is all that is needed for image processing.

“Using the Windows operating system, we have programs to record the images and put them in a database of patients.”

“I can now make a complete endoscope system in just one week.”

So far he has built one for himself and two for colleagues.

Technology novice

Nguyen Phuoc Huy started out as a medical doctor. Whilst he knew all about the human body, he was no technology expert. So he taught himself the basics of computing, optics and mathematics in his own time.

“In the beginning I had real problems installing new software on my PC and I often had to ask for help from some IT teacher living nearby.

“I also got advice on optics from physics teachers and I could design the optical apparatus in the lenses of my endoscope. I even had to revisit my physics notebooks from high school, revise my mathematics.”

Dr Huy is set to make similar systems for other poor hospitals in Vietnam and even for medical centres in other countries. But he says people still do not know much about his product.

Having learnt all about the technology, the next step for Dr Huy is getting to grip with the marketing techniques he will need to spread the word even further.

The Department of Immigration

Thursday, August 25, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/department-of-immigration.html>

As more and more details have now been revealed about the case of Vivian Solon, it has become increasingly clear that the Department of Immigration has failed Australia. Not only did it erroneously deport an Australian citizen (which was the result of incompetence in investigation), it also did its best to cover up the fact after its error was known.

It is an absolute disgrace and is the result of the politicisation of this vital public sector department.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/editorial/a-culture-of-denial/2005/08/22/1124562800507.html>

A culture of denial (editorial)

August 23, 2005

The saga of Vivian Alvarez Solon is much more than the string of wrongs so carelessly and callously inflicted upon the seriously ill Australian mother. That is not to suggest Ms Alvarez's wrongful deportation to the Philippines in 2001 by the Department of Immigration, where she was abandoned in a hospice for the dying, was anything short of a devastating personal tragedy. But it has become clear this was no simple mistake. Ms Alvarez's deportation was only possible because of multiple failures across government departments. All systems are, of course, vulnerable to human error, especially large, unwieldy bureaucracies. The question, though, is how a system responds to failure. Does it move quickly and openly to correct the problem and to alleviate the personal suffering caused by poor or ill-

204

informed decision making? Or does it bunker down for a cover-up, alert to every opportunity to shift blame?

The case of Ms Alvarez elicited a cowardly litany of half-truths and denials from those in charge, senior men and women who could be relied upon not to have been properly briefed by the appropriate underlings or not to have the relevant file to hand.

So who, then, is responsible? There are two answers. One is literal: it involves painstakingly unpicking the events which led to Ms Alvarez's deportation, as the Herald has done, and identifying every individual involved in pushing the mentally ill and seriously injured Ms Alvarez onto the flight to Manila, plus everyone who knew or came to know of the mistake but did nothing to correct it. That is important. But the second answer is even more important. It requires the ministers and department heads who presided over this culture of disregard to demonstrate accountability. Cultures of impunity, which facilitate such grievous errors, come from the top. The stunning decision, for example, to hand Bill Farmer, the department head at the time Ms Alvarez was deported, a prized ambassadorship sent exactly the wrong message.

The Howard Government has gradually politicised the public service and undermined one of its vital functions in a democracy: to tell the government courageously what it needs to know, not just what it wants to hear. The politically expedient lies perpetrated in the children overboard scandal, for example, elicited a string of denials of knowledge right up to the Prime Minister's office. Governments and their agents wield considerable power over the lives of individuals, and should shoulder commensurate responsibility. Take the casual musings of an immigration official who wrongly suggested, in official documents, that Ms Alvarez may have been an Asian sex slave. Not only did this cast an immediate slur on her character – against which she had no recourse – but went to the subsequent diligence, or lack thereof, applied to her case. That such racial stereotypes persist within

the key department handling foreigners is real cause for concern. So too, is the Herald's revelation that Foreign Affairs officials knew two years ago that Ms Alvarez had been wrongly deported.

Ultimately, however, the most damning truth is this: Ms Alvarez is still in the Philippines. She remains unconvinced that the same Government which failed her will now care for her on her return home.

Homeopathy no better than placebo

Sunday, August 28, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/homeopathy-no-better-than-placebo.html>

On the face of it, homeopathy shouldn't work. Even if the original substance has a pharmacological effect, by diluting it down to infinitesimally small quantities (in some instances, such that no molecule of the original substance exists), the remaining substance is no more than water (with perhaps some alcohol).

Homeopaths have tried to create a whole field of pseudoscience around this plain unalterable fact by saying that there is somehow a "memory" of the substance imprinted in the water. This is, of course, nonsense.

An article published in *The Lancet* has recently examined many trials conducted between homeopathic medicines and placebo and has found that homeopathy does not provide benefit on top of placebo. I hope this is finally put to rest.

I personally don't have any particular issue with homeopathy but unfortunately, the field is full of quacks. If a homeopathy thinks that they can treat potentially life-threatening conditions like asthma, then the treatments better work as well as conventional medications. Needless to say, they don't work at all.

The criticism against this study is most telling of the attitude of some practitioners of homeopathy:

“It has been established beyond doubt and accepted by many researchers, that the placebo-controlled randomised controlled trial is not a fitting research tool with which to test homeopathy.”

What an utterly disgraceful attitude. Double-blinded randomised controlled trials are a perfect tool to test homeopathy. What's so hard about it? For the particular condition being treated, the homeopath does his usual consultation and depending on the trial criteria should be able to select patients who are suitable for the homeopathic medicine. Then, another homeopath does the preparation along with a placebo. Only one is used, but neither the treating homeopathy or patient knows which.

This is easy. In fact, it's harder with conventional medications because it can be difficult to make a placebo that looks and tastes like the real thing, not to mention that some medications have easily recognisable effects on some people.

Take home message: **homeopathy is placebo.**

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/4183916.stm>

Homeopathy's benefit questioned

A leading medical journal has made a damning attack on homeopathy, saying it is no better than dummy drugs.

The Lancet says the time for more studies is over and doctors should be bold and honest with patients about homeopathy's "lack of benefit".

A Swiss-UK review of 110 trials found no convincing evidence the treatment worked any better than a placebo.

Advocates of homeopathy maintained the therapy, which works on the principle of treating like with like, does work.

Continuing dispute

Someone with an allergy, for example, who was using homeopathic medicines would attempt to beat it with an ultra-diluted dose of an agent that would cause the same symptoms.

The row over homeopathy has been raging for years.

In 2002, American illusionist James Randi offered \$1m to anyone able to prove, under observed conditions in a laboratory, that homeopathic remedies can really cure people.

To date, no-one has passed the preliminary tests.

In the UK, homeopathy is available on the NHS. Some argue that it should be more widely available, while others believe it should not be offered at all.

In 2000, the UK Parliamentary Select Committee on Science and Technology issued a report on complementary and alternative medicine.

It reported that “any therapy that makes specific claims for being able to treat specific conditions should have evidence of being able to do this above and beyond the placebo effect”.

‘No better than placebo’

According to Professor Matthias Egger, from the University of Berne, and Swiss colleagues from Zurich University and a UK team at the University of Bristol, homeopathy has no such evidence.

They compared 110 trials that looked at the effects of homeopathy versus placebo with 110 trials of conventional medicines for the same medical disorders or diseases.

This included trials for the treatment of asthma, allergies and muscular problems, some large and some small.

For both homeopathy and conventional medicines, the smaller trials of lower quality showed more beneficial treatment effects than the larger trials.

However, when they looked at only the larger, high-quality trials, they found no convincing evidence that homeopathy worked any better than placebo.

Professor Egger said: “We acknowledge to prove a negative is impossible.

“But good large studies of homeopathy do not show a difference between the placebo and the homeopathic remedy, whereas in the case of conventional medicines you still see an effect.”

He said some people do report feeling better after having homeopathy. He believes this is down to the whole experience of the therapy, with the homeopath spending a lot of time and attention on the individual.

“It has nothing to do with what is in the little white pill,” he said.

‘Research bias’

However, the Lancet also reports that a draft report on homeopathy by the World Health Organization says the majority of peer-reviewed scientific papers published over the past 40 years have demonstrated that homeopathy is superior to placebo in placebo-controlled trials.

Furthermore, it says that homeopathy is equivalent to conventional medicines in the treatment of illnesses, both in humans and animals.

Professor Edzard Ernst, professor of complementary medicine at the Peninsula Medical School in Exeter, said the draft WHO report seemed overtly biased and that all of the trials cited happened to be positive.

“They are not the most rigorous ones, not the most recent,” he said.

A spokeswoman from the Society of Homeopaths said: “Many previous studies have demonstrated that homeopathy has an effect over and above placebo.

“It has been established beyond doubt and accepted by many researchers, that the placebo-controlled randomised controlled trial is not a fitting research tool with which to test homeopathy.”

Terrorism is only attacks by “enemies of Israel”

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/terrorism-are-only-attacks-by-enemies.html>

Palestinian Arabs shot dead on a bus earlier in the month by a Jewish man (who was disillusioned by the disengagement process) are not considered victims of terrorism by Israeli law. According to the defence ministry, only attacks by “enemies of Israel” are considered to be terrorism.

This is an extremely shorted sighted and hypocritical position. Even the Israeli Prime Minister publicly claimed that this action was an example of “Jewish” terrorism. Surely any form of terrorism is an “enemy of Israel” even if the perpetrator was an Israeli Jew.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4198754.stm

Arabs lose Israeli terror stipend

Families of Israeli Arabs shot dead on a bus in Galilee are not considered terrorism victims because their killer was Jewish, the defence ministry says.

Under Israeli law, only attacks by “enemies of Israel” are considered terrorism, the ministry said.

The ruling means families of the four victims will not be entitled to the lifelong monthly payments given to Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks.

The ministry says it has offered them an unspecified one-off payment.

The Arabs were killed by a 19-year-old Israeli army deserter who was thought to be trying to derail the evacuation of Jewish settlements in Gaza.

The architect of the Gaza plan, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, called the shooting “a despicable act by a bloodthirsty terrorist”.

He is reported to have asked for the Galilee dead to be treated as terrorism victims – but to have been prevented by the law.

An Israeli Arab member of parliament, Muhammad Barak, said there was a strong scent of racism about the decision, because it distinguished between Jewish terrorism and Arab terrorism.

He has submitted an amendment to allow Israel to compensate anyone hurt in “hostile activities by a terror organisation” – not just those hurt by “organisations hostile to Israel”, Haaretz reports.

Mobile phones do not cause cancer

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/08/mobile-phones-do-not-cause-cancer.html>

Every now and then, somebody jumps up and down claiming that the use of mobile phones will cause the end of the world. Well, usually, it's a small study that apparently shows some link between cancer and mobile phone use; or it's an animal study where mice are blasted with microwave radiation at equivalent levels never experienced by humans.

The latest Institute of Cancer Research work is the largest study to date. It showed that there was no increase risk of acoustic neuroma (which some past studies have suggested that there was a link) regardless of how heavily a mobile phone was used.

Basically, this is all fairly consistent with current knowledge. There has not be a new “epidemic” of brain tumours since the rise of mobile phone usage and neither are there any convincing mechanisms for this to occur.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4196762.stm>

Mobile phone cancer link rejected

Mobile phone use does not raise the risk of cancer, at least in the first 10 years of use, the largest investigation to date shows.

Some past studies had suggested an increased risk of acoustic neuroma – a tumour of the nerve connecting the ear and the brain – but others did not.

The latest Institute of Cancer Research work includes data from five European countries and more than 4,000 people.

Expert advice is still to limit mobile phone use as a precautionary measure.

There are more than one billion mobile phone users worldwide.

Longer follow-up is needed to check that health problems do not arise with many more years of use, the researchers say in the *British Journal of Cancer*.

An independent group for the UK government, led by Sir William Stewart, that looked into the safety of mobile phones in the late 1990s also concluded mobile phones did not appear to harm health.

However, the group said there was evidence that radiation from mobile phones could potentially cause adverse health effects, and therefore a “precautionary approach” to their use should be adopted.

Precautions

The government currently advises mobile phone users to keep their call times short.

And children under the age of 16 should use mobile phones for essential calls only, because their head and nervous systems may still be developing.

The latest data from the UK, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, included 678 people with acoustic neuroma and 3,553 without this form of cancer.

This revealed no relation between the risk of acoustic neuroma and the number of years for which the mobile phones had been used, the time since first use, total hours of use or total number of calls.

Nor was there any link with analogue or digital phones or whether or not a hands-free kit was used.

On balance, the evidence suggests there is no substantial risk of acoustic neuroma in the first decade of use – but the possibility of some effect after longer periods remains open, the researchers concluded.

Senior investigator Professor Anthony Swedlow said: “Whether there are longer-term risks remains unknown, reflecting the fact that this is a relatively recent technology.”

Dr Michael Clark from the Health Protection Agency said: “This is good news but we still need to be a bit cautious.”

Dr Julie Sharp, senior science information officer at Cancer Research UK, said: “This study provides further evidence that using mobile phones does not increase the risk of brain tumours.

“However, it is important that researchers continue to monitor phone users over the coming years as mobiles are still a relatively new invention.”

The research is part of a bigger study that will be published next year.

A Swedish study identified an increased risk of acoustic neuromas among people who had used mobile phones for 10 years or more.

People have been concerned that the radiofrequency from phones might cause cancers, despite the absence of a known biological mechanism for this.

Aggregated carbon nanorods – harder than diamond

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/08/aggregated-carbon-nanorods-harder-than.html>

A new material, “aggregated carbon nanorods” or ACNR has been recently created by compressing carbon buckyballs (carbon-60) under 200 times atmospheric pressure at a temperature of over 2000°C.

On testing this material, it can scratch ordinary diamond!

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn7926&feedId=online-news_rss20

Nano-material is harder than diamonds

- 18:18 30 August 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Will Knight

A material that is harder than diamond has been created in the lab, by packing together tiny “nanorods” of carbon.

The new material, known as aggregated carbon nanorods (ACNR), was created by compressing and heating super-strong carbon molecules called buckyballs or carbon-60. These molecules consist of 60 atoms that interlock in hexagonal or pentagonal shapes and resemble tiny soccer balls.

The super-tough ACNR was created by compressing carbon-60 to 200 times normal atmospheric pressure, while simultaneously heating it to 2226°C.

The properties of the resulting material were then measured using a diamond anvil cell at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in France. This instrument squeezes a material between two normal diamonds, enabling researchers to study it at high pressure using synchrotron radiation – extremely intense X-rays which reveal the material's structure.

The researchers found their ACNR to be 0.3% denser than ordinary diamond and more resistant to pressure than any other known material.

Industrial applications

“Our material actually scratches normal diamonds,” says Natalia Dubrovinskaia, of the University of Bayreuth, in Germany, who led the research. “We were very excited, and glad.”

While an ordinary diamond gets its hardness from the strong molecular bonds between each of its atoms, ACNR derives its strength from the fact that it is formed from interlocking nanorods, the researchers say.

Dubrovinskaia told *New Scientist* the material could have a wide range of potential industrial applications. As it is stable at very high temperatures, she says it could be better than normal diamond for deep drilling and polishing abrasive materials. She also believes it will be easy to mass produce the super-tough material. “It's a very reproducible result,” she adds.

Journal reference: *Applied Physics Letters* (vol 87, 08, p 3106)

September 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Regeneration in mice

Sunday, September 04, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/09/regeneration-in-mice.html>

I have just recently read a most amazing news article. Scientists have created mice that can regenerate complex tissues including toes, joints, tails and even heart tissue. Simpler animals such as amphibians have limited abilities of regeneration but this ability is usually not present in more complex animals. Specifically, it is not an ability held by any mammal.

If this line of research is applicable to humans, it would really be the “Holy Grail” of medicine in the future. For example, a “heart attack” would not be a big issue if we possessed the ability to simply “regenerate” the damaged cardiac tissue.

Source article

http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5744,16417002%255E30417,00.html

It's a miracle: mice regrow hearts

August 29, 2005

SCIENTISTS have created “miracle mice” that can regenerate amputated limbs or damaged vital organs, making them able to recover from injuries that would kill or permanently disable normal animals.

The experimental animals are unique among mammals in their ability to regrow their heart, toes, joints and tail.

And when cells from the test mouse are injected into ordinary mice, they too acquire the ability to regenerate, the US-based researchers say.

Their discoveries raise the prospect that humans could one day be given the ability to regenerate lost or damaged organs, opening up a new era in medicine.

Details of the research will be presented next week at a scientific conference on ageing titled Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence, at Cambridge University in Britain.

The research leader, Ellen Heber-Katz, professor of immunology at the Wistar Institute, a US biomedical research centre, said the ability of the mice at her laboratory to regenerate organs appeared to be controlled by about a dozen genes.

Professor Heber-Katz says she is still researching the genes' exact functions, but it seems almost certain humans have comparable genes.

"We have experimented with amputating or damaging several different organs, such as the heart, toes, tail and ears, and just watched them regrow," she said.

"It is quite remarkable. The only organ that did not grow back was the brain.

"When we injected fetal liver cells taken from those animals into ordinary mice, they too gained the power of regeneration. We found this persisted even six months after the injection."

Professor Heber-Katz made her discovery when she noticed the identification holes that scientists punch in the ears of experimental mice healed without any signs of scarring in the animals at her laboratory.

The self-healing mice, from a strain known as MRL, were then subjected to a series of surgical procedures. In one case the mice had their toes amputated – but the digits grew back, complete with joints.

In another test some of the tail was cut off, and this also regenerated. Then the researchers used a cryoprobe to freeze parts of the animals' hearts, and watched them grow back again. A similar phenomenon was observed when the optic nerve was severed and the liver partially destroyed.

The researchers believe the same genes could confer greater longevity and are measuring their animals' survival rate. However, the mice are only 18 months old, and the normal lifespan is two years so it is too early to reach firm conclusions.

Scientists have long known that less complex creatures have an impressive ability to regenerate. Many fish and amphibians can regrow internal organs or even whole limbs.

The Sunday Times

Katrina betrays the fragility of civilisation

Tuesday, September 06, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/09/katrina-betrays-fragility-of.html>

Hurricane Katrina has devastated New Orleans. The human aftermath however, has been very telling of society, specifically, that of the United States. Victims, huddling together in shops, rooftops and trees, armed gangs looting, refugee camps becoming scenes of rapes, murder and robbery, the pitifully slow emergency response from the government.

Though one cannot minimise the scale of the natural disaster, this cannot, however, be blamed for the evident disintegration of civilised behaviour. It is hard to imagine that level of depravity could happen in any other Western nation with a similar natural disaster. For example, the areas affected by the tsunami in late 2004 did fall into such anarchy.

No, there is something dark and malicious festering under the thin veneer of civility in the US. When tested in the crucible of natural disaster or the stress of extreme social upheaval, this mask is torn away revealing decades if not centuries of unresolved social and racial tension.

The Sydney Morning Herald today had a very good editorial and opinion piece to this regard.

Source articles

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/floods-reaffirm-ugly-truth-of-racial-divide/2005/09/05/1125772459288.html>

Floods reaffirm ugly truth of racial divide

September 6, 2005

Katrina could end the careless pursuit of small government in the US, writes Jonathan Freedland.

THE waters flow in and the waters flow out, washing away all that once lay on the surface – and revealing what lies beneath. So it is with all floods in all places, but now it is the United States which stands exposed. And neither the US nor the world much likes what it sees.

The first revelation was not spoken in words, but written in the faces of those left behind. TV viewers could not help but notice it, and Americans could not deny it. The women pleading for their lives in handwritten signs, the children clinging to tree branches, the prisoners herded onto a jail roof – they were overwhelmingly black.

This will not be news to most Americans. They know that a racial divide still haunts their country, as it has from its founding. Race is America's fatal flaw, the weakness which so often brings it low.

Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, could see the danger. "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just. His justice cannot sleep forever," he wrote in 1785, reflecting on the crime that was slavery.

Time and time again, the US has been forced to wake up to the racial injustice which has been its historic curse. It was the source of a civil war in the 19th century and of repeated battles through the 20th. From the desegregation and civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s to the Los Angeles riots, the US has undergone periodic reminders that it is in the

relationship between black and white that it has failed to honour its own, animating ideals.

Katrina has rammed home that message once more, with lacerating force. White Americans, who regarded New Orleans as a kind of playground, a place to enjoy the carnal pleasures, have learnt things about that city that they would probably have preferred not to know. They have discovered that it was mainly white folks who lived on the higher, safer ground, while poorer, black families had to huddle in the cheaper, low-lying housing – that race, in other words, determined who got hit.

They have also learnt that 28 per cent of the people of New Orleans live in poverty and that 84 per cent of those are black. Or that some people in that city were so poor, they did not have the money to catch a bus out of town – that race, in other words, determined who got left behind. Most Americans want to believe that kind of inequality belongs in the past. But Katrina has shaken them from that delusion.

They have had to face another painful truth. Their Government has proved itself incompetent. Yes, it could act quickly once it had decided to act – but it idled for days. This disastrous performance will surely saddle the remainder of George Bush's presidency, just as the botched Desert One rescue of US hostages from the besieged US embassy in Tehran hobbled that of Jimmy Carter.

Americans expect competence from their leader as a minimum requirement. And if an image of a crashed helicopter in the Iranian desert could undo one president, surely pictures of a US city reduced to a Somali or Bangladeshi kind of chaos spell disaster for this one.

But the shock may do more than shift perceptions of the Administration. For 25 years, the dominant US ideology has been to shrink the state. "Government is not the solution to our problem," declared Ronald Reagan.

“Government is the problem.” After decades of energetic government programs, from Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal in the 1930s to Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society in the ’60s, the state was compelled to retreat. Taxes would go down and the Government would do less. Bush personifies that ideology with more vigour than anyone since Reagan. Yet now, after Katrina, the national mood might alter. Americans have seen where small government leads.

The authorities in Louisiana, including the military, pleaded long ago with Washington to reinforce the levees that were designed to save New Orleans from a great flood. The Army Corps of Engineers asked for \$US105 million (\$136 million): the White House gave it \$US40 million.

It is conceivable that Americans will now call a halt to their quarter-century experiment in limited government – and the neglected infrastructure that has entailed. There are some tasks which neither individuals nor private companies can do alone – and evacuating tens of thousands of people from a drowning city is one of them.

The New York Times’s resident conservative columnist, David Brooks, wonders if there could now be a “progressive resurgence”. There is a precedent. After an earlier Louisiana disaster, the floods of 1927, there was public outrage that not a single federal dollar had gone to feed or shelter the victims; the army had even demanded reimbursement from the Red Cross for the use of its tents. From now on, the public resolved, the Federal Government would have to protect the vulnerable. That shift paved the way for the activism of Franklin Roosevelt and all that followed. Nearly 80 years on, history might be about to repeat itself.

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/editorial/katrinass-big-victim/2005/09/05/1125772459587.html>

Katrina’s big victim

September 6, 2005

The weather warning delivered to New Orleans on the morning of Sunday, August 28, was clear and precise: Hurricane Katrina would bring devastating damage. It would render large areas of the city uninhabitable for weeks. Half of all well-built houses would have roofs and walls fail. On and on it went. And yet, though warnings were issued and the city evacuated as far it could be, US authorities appear to have done little to be ready to help those left behind.

Exactly who is to blame for America's spectacular failure to look after its own will no doubt be determined by detailed inquiries in coming months, but without any doubt the political burden now falls heaviest on the shoulders of its President, George Bush. The sick, the elderly, the newborn left to die in squalor without food or water as armed gangs rape, loot and kill – these images from the world's richest nation are not quickly forgotten. The US, like the rest of the world, is shocked. But it is angry, too. Mr Bush has toured the devastation twice now. He has hugged the homeless and encouraged aid workers. But despite his attempts at Churchillian rhetoric, Mr Bush is looking less and less like the leader for a crisis.

Mr Bush is burdened already with blame for his Iraq imbroglio. His poll ratings are plumbing depths rarely reached by other presidents in the past six decades. The anti-war movement is growing. Hurricane Katrina has, paradoxically, sharpened that criticism. Though previous administrations may have neglected New Orleans, reports that resources which might have gone to maintain its levees were diverted by the US Army Corps of Engineers to Iraq will tell against him. The theme "charity begins at home" has resounded like an ostinato bass note through reports of the catastrophe, as victim after victim compares Washington's energetic efforts in the Middle East and after the tsunami with its tardiness in its own southern states since Katrina came ashore.

All this has political consequences. The Republican Party holds the presidency and majorities in both houses of Congress. The death of William Rehnquist, the chief justice of the US, should give Mr Bush a chance to seal his party's domination of national politics by aligning the third branch of government – the Supreme Court – with the other two. America's religious right, where Mr Bush finds strong support, wants to see a radical conservative appointed who might reverse liberal victories of the past in fields such as abortion and prayer in schools. But the loss of authority which goes with such a public failure as the Katrina debacle may well mean Mr Bush will have to compromise and choose a moderate candidate for the post. Beyond that hurdle lie the mid-term congressional elections, where Republicans can now expect a backlash against their party's administration in the White House. Despite the apparent solidity of the Republicans' domination, Katrina's gales may well have been blown it away, along with the wooden homes of New Orleans.

Philips reveals rollable display

Thursday, September 08, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/09/philips-reveals-rollable-display.html>



Philips' prototype of their "rollable" display

At the IFA show, Philips has revealed a prototype of a "rollable" display. Very small and compact when closed, the display rolls open revealing a large display area. Amazing! As always, it seems that these display technologies are taking a very long time to reach the marketplace.

Source article

<http://www.pocketpcthoughts.com/index.php?action=expand,42816>

Philips Rollable Display Parading at IFA 2005

Posted by Darius Wey @ 06:00 AM

"It seemed to me that Philips has something very interesting to show at their Philips booth. Located in hall 22, Philips offers the visitor a lot of new

products from hard disk recorders to HDTV devices, Blue-Ray solutions to prototypes. Only one working device is currently present at the IFA show. Of course I needed to see this one with my own eyes so the search began. Somewhere in a corner one of Philips's demonstrating girls carried it hanging around her neck: Philips' rollable display device. Simply referred to as: "Amazing!" Ultra light and stylishly designed you can carry the rollable device with you wherever you wanna go. The device is very small and it unfolds a large display that is actually larger than the device area."

Earlier in the week, Philips demonstrated its rollable display prototype at the IFA 2005 show. Content can only be displayed in grayscale and QVGA, but it's a concept in the making and we may just end up seeing rollable colour displays in the not-too-distant future. Rollable displays for future Pocket PCs? Yeah, I could do with that. It could help make a pocket-sized device even more pocket-sized, and you can impress your friends too.

Bush's tapestry of spin and incompetence starts to unravel

Thursday, September 08, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/09/bushs-tapestry-of-spin-and.html>

The scale of the Katrina disaster was simply too large for Bush's PR machine to handle. It was time for real action and leadership. However, what we have seen is nothing short of incompetence from many levels of government and bureaucracy. This is highlighted no more clearly than by Bush's first visit to New Orleans. It was nothing more than a shameless photo opportunity exercise.

Now, though there is scramble to do what needs to be done, it is already too late. Much of the early rescue and disaster management effort were heroically performed at the community level. However, a professional and co-ordinated disaster management plan was never realised, and it is this that is required most from Day 0. Many fully self-sufficient (including transport) international teams were ready for deployment to provide assistance after one or two days only to be foiled by a bumbling US government which had no plan of its own.

Bush, who deludes himself as a "man of action" but has no leadership skills unfortunately, has surrounded himself with

sycophants. The American public deserve better and should demand as much.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/attacks-on-bush-continue-to-grow/2005/09/07/1125772584569.html>

Attacks on Bush continue to grow

By Michael Gawenda Herald Correspondent in Washington and agencies
September 8, 2005

An announcement by President George Bush that he would lead an inquiry into the response to Hurricane Katrina by all levels of government has failed to stem mounting criticism of the Administration's handling of the disaster.

A Republican who is to head a separate Senate investigation of the crisis said on Tuesday that the Government's response was "woefully inadequate" and raised doubts about the country's ability to cope with a terrorist attack.

The chairwoman of the Homeland Security Committee, Susan Collins, spoke as legislators prepared to provide a second round of emergency funds expected to be about \$US40 billion (\$52 billion).

"If our system did such a poor job when there was no enemy, how would the federal, state and local governments have coped with a terrorist attack that provided no advance warning and that was intent on causing as much death and destruction as possible?" she asked.

"It is hard to understand the lack of response to a disaster that was predicted for years."

Mr Bush said after a crisis cabinet meeting on Tuesday that his investigation would "find out what went right and what went wrong".

“It’s very important for us to understand the relationship between the federal government, the state government and the local government when it comes to a major catastrophe,” he said.

While mistakes were made by state and local governments, most Americans expect the President to take charge in a crisis and it is the perception that Mr Bush did not do so that concerns his supporters. Even Rupert Murdoch’s Fox news network has been critical.

The media have kept up a barrage of attacks, putting the Administration on the defensive.

A senior Democratic senator, Patrick Leahy, asked how it was that television crews with all their equipment could get to the New Orleans Superdome, where people were left in appalling conditions for three days, and rescue crews could not.

“Why the hell couldn’t a truckload of water be brought in?” he asked. “Why the hell couldn’t a truckload of medicine be brought in and a truckload of doctors and nurses? The media did a magnificent job and they got in day one.”

Mr Bush looked slightly shell-shocked as he tried to deflect media questions about the timing and conduct of his inquiry. “We are not in the blame game,” he said. “We are can-do people and there’s enough to do right now without apportioning blame”.

Against the backdrop of ruin, Mr Bush was not helped by his mother, Barbara. After visiting a Houston refugee centre, Mrs Bush told a radio program the relocations had “worked well” and many evacuees were “underprivileged anyway”.

Ebay buys Skype!

Tuesday, September 20, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/09/ebay-buys-skype.html>

In a move that I don't completely understand, Ebay has bought probably the most famous (in terms of notoriety and "coolness" factor) IP telephony service Skype. Along with its previous purchase of PayPal (which for all intents and purposes functions as an international bank), this definitely makes Ebay one of the "big players" on the corporate internet scene along with Google, Yahoo, AOL and Microsoft.

Of course, how Ebay is going to tie Skype into its business model is somewhat of a mystery to me...

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4237338.stm>

EBay to buy Skype in \$2.6bn deal

Online auction site eBay has agreed to buy internet telephone company Skype Technologies in a \$2.6bn (£1.4bn) deal.

EBay said it would pay half the amount in cash and the other half in stocks to create "an unparalleled e-commerce and communications engine".

Skype's software lets PC users talk to each other for free and make cut-price calls to mobiles and landlines.

Other players in the online phone market include computer giants such as Google, Microsoft, AOL and Yahoo.

Google recently launched its Talk service, while Microsoft purchased leading player Teleo for an undisclosed sum.

Technology used by Skype, and rivals such as Vonage, converts phone conversations into packets of data and transmits them down the same wires used to surf the internet.

If certain performance targets are met, eBay said it would pay an additional \$1.5bn to Skype over the next three years , bringing the total size of the deal to \$4bn.

‘Powerful environment’

“Communications is at the heart of e-commerce and community,” said eBay chief executive Meg Whitman.

“By combining the two leading e-commerce franchises, eBay and PayPal, with the leader in internet voice communications, we will create an extraordinarily powerful environment for business on the net.”

The company said the move would “strengthen eBay’s global marketplace and payments platform, while opening several new lines of business”.

Skype chief executive Niklas Zennstrom, who will join eBay’s senior management team, said the deal would help “revolutionise the ease with which people can communicate through the internet”.

Using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services, computer users can talk to each other via a headset or microphone and speakers.

Cheap calls to landlines and mobile phones are also possible. Some systems allow users to plug their traditional phones into a desktop box that allows them to make VoIP calls.

Growth market?

Skype has 53 million registered users and says more than two million people are using its software at any given moment.

Since it was introduced in 2003, the free program has been downloaded more than 151 million times.

The company does not release earnings figures.

Vonage, the largest internet phone company, has nearly one million subscribers who pay a monthly fee of \$25 to use it.

EBay has been buying up firms – including payment system PayPal – in an effort to increase the number of services it offers to consumers and keep its profits growing.

Media reports have speculated that as well as looking to tap into the growing internet phone market, eBay is also attracted by the idea of letting its buyers and sellers talk to each other via their computers.

The first Windows powered Treo

Sunday, September 25, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/09/first-windows-powered-treo.html>



The new Treo 700W

As I predicted last year, Palm will finally walk the path of Windows Mobile. Engadget has pictures of the upcoming Treo 700W that will run Windows Mobile 5.

Source article

<http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000303060206/>

Palm and Verizon to unveil Treo 700w on Monday

Posted Sep 23, 2005, 6:20 PM ET by Evan Blass

Hopefully due in no small part to our exclusive first look, Palm, Verizon, and Microsoft will be holding a joint press conference on Monday; we can only presume it's to (officially) announce the new Windows Mobile-powered Treo 700w. If our pic gallery wasn't enough to satisfy your Treo-jones, you still have the whole weekend to Photoshop some press credentials and book a flight over to San Francisco. The fun begins at 9 A.M. in the Twin Peaks conference room at the Palace Hotel.

Of politics and the health system

Sunday, September 25, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/09/of-politics-and-health-system.html>

The Camden-Campbelltown affair is a terrible saga of political interference, scapegoating, malicious grudges and a failure to both the population serviced by these two hospitals and the staff who work within it.

The Sydney Morning Herald as a good editorial piece today which pretty much sums it all up.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/editorial/syyyyydney-go-the-swans/2005/09/23/1126982225561.html>

Politics and our hospitals

Few people and few organisations emerge from the Camden and Campbelltown hospitals affair with their reputations enhanced. Not the hospital system, which has been shown to have failed patients. Not the Government, which manipulated resources at Camden hospital for its own political ends and then, when problems emerged, scapegoated individuals whose blameworthiness was not clear. Not the Opposition, which has played up the alleged scandal for all it was worth. And now – following the Independent Commission Against Corruption report on the affair – not even the nurses who first blew the whistle.

ICAC has found that the nurses' allegations were based only on hearsay. The nurses – who stand by their allegations still – may genuinely have believed them, but the commission says they had nothing to back them up. Five

careers have been shredded as a result of their claims – four health administrators’ and that of the former health minister, Craig Knowles.

Yet there were genuine problems at the hospitals. The inquiry by Bret Walker, SC, which reported in July last year, found that 10 patients had been mismanaged, and a number of doctors and nurses should be investigated. Five doctors still face a Medical Tribunal hearing. Mr Walker also found deficiencies in the way cases had been investigated by the Health Care Complaints Commission.

Even so, in the tumult and shouting over individual cases, the health-care needs of the people of south-western Sydney have got lost. A whiff of scandal whips up public emotions and starts a hunt for scapegoats. With dead patients’ families complaining publicly, the atmosphere quickly becomes overheated. Politicians hoping to turn the emotion to their advantage heat it further until any hope of a rational solution to real problems melts away.

Facilities at Camden hospital were reopened by the Carr Government against bureaucrats’ advice to win favour with voters in the hope of wresting a seat from the Coalition. Resources were drawn away from Campbelltown. Medical mistakes happen even in the best-resourced hospitals. When staff are overworked and have few resources, as at Camden and Campbelltown, they happen more often. Most doctors and nurses are conscientious and professional. Witch-hunts and seeking scapegoats will not improve them. This case should be a warning to all: high-pressure politics and hospitals are a deadly mixture. Handle with extreme care.

October 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Australians win 2005 Nobel Prize for Medicine

Sunday, October 09, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/10/australians-win-2005-nobel-prize-for.html>



*Dr Robin Warren and
Prof Barry Marshall*

Dr Robin Warren and Professor Barry Marshall, the pair that demonstrated that most peptic ulcer disease was caused by a bacterial infection (by *Helicobacter pylori*) have been awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine.

Their discovery at the time overturned the existing dogma of the day and turned peptic ulcer disease from a long term chronic disorder, to something that can often be treated with a course of antibiotics. There was a lot of resistance at the time, in no small part due to the fact that acid suppressing drugs were one of the largest earners for the pharmaceutical industry.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/good-gut-instincts-win-pair-a-nobel-for-medicine/2005/10/03/1128191658662.html>

Good gut instincts win pair a Nobel for medicine

By Richard Macey and AP

October 4, 2005

Two Australian researchers who turned medicine upside down by showing that peptic ulcers and gastritis could be caused by a bacterium have been awarded the 2005 Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine.

One, Barry Marshall, proved his point to doubters by swallowing a glassful of the bacteria.

About a week later he started vomiting and suffering other painful symptoms of gastritis.

Before the discovery in 1982 that *Helicobacter pylori* played a role in gastritis and peptic ulcers, stress and lifestyle were considered the main causes of peptic ulcer disease. The last Australian to win a Nobel Prize was Peter Doherty for medicine in 1996.

Announcing the prize yesterday, the Nobel Assembly said Robin Warren, 68, a pathologist from Perth, “observed small curved bacteria colonising the lower part of the stomach in about 50 per cent of patients from which biopsies had been taken. He made the crucial observation that signs of inflammation were always present in the gastric mucosa close to where the bacteria were seen.”

Professor Marshall, 54, became interested in Dr Warren’s findings, and together they initiated a study of biopsies from 100 patients. “After several attempts, Marshall succeeded in cultivating a hitherto unknown bacterial species – later denoted *Helicobacter pylori* – from several of these biopsies,” the assembly said. “Together they found that the organism was present in almost all patients with gastric inflammation, duodenal ulcer or gastric ulcer. Based on these results they proposed that *Helicobacter pylori* is involved in the aetiology of these diseases.”

Their work meant peptic ulcer disease, often a disabling condition, could be cured by antibiotics and acid secretion inhibitors.

The medicine prize includes 10 million kronor (\$1.7 million), a gold medal and a handshake with Sweden's king at the awards ceremony in Stockholm in December.

The secretary of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia, Dr Katie Ellard, was elated by the news yesterday. "It seemed improbable," she recalled. "It had been taught so long that [ulcers] were related to stress and related to aspirin and anti-arthritis drugs. You could hardly believe that if there was a bacteria causing ulcers that that hadn't been discovered before."

Bird flu spreading to Europe

Tuesday, October 11, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/10/bird-flu-spreading-to-europe.html>

One of the greatest modern threats to the current world is the H5N1 “bird flu”. Although there has been some publicity, the governments of the world have by large mostly neglected to adequately act on this threat. Bird flu has the potential to be just as lethal as the 1918 Spanish flu which killed around 1% of the world’s population.

There are now reports that bird flu may have spread to a Romanian village in the Danube delta though this has not yet been confirmed. It is known that bird flu has spread to central Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkey.

Source article

<http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8122>

Bird flu may have reached Europe

- 16:21 10 October 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Debora MacKenzie

Fears that H5N1 bird flu has reached Europe intensified this week with apparent outbreaks in Turkey and Romania.

It will not be clear for several days whether the outbreaks are avian influenza, and if so, whether it is the same H5N1 strain that has spread across east Asia and killed at least 60 people. But scientists caution that Europe’s free-range poultry could be putting the continent at risk.

A Romanian village in the Danube delta, which is a stopover for migratory birds from Asia, was quarantined after 36 birds died. Initial blood tests suggest the cause was bird flu, though this has not been confirmed.

A scientist from the UK's Veterinary Laboratories Agency at Weybridge in Surrey is travelling to Romania to investigate, says VLA spokesman Matt Conway.

There have been outbreaks of bird flu across six provinces in central Russia, and in Kazakhstan, since July 2005. Several were confirmed as H5N1.

Village closed off

Meanwhile a turkey farmer in north-western Turkey reported last week that 1700 of his birds had died, and Turkey's Anatolia news agency said the cause was an H5 flu virus. A 3-kilometre radius around the village has been closed off and all birds and stray dogs within it are being killed.

"We expect a sample from Turkey today," Conway told New Scientist. It will take 48 hours to confirm if the virus is the "Z genotype" H5N1 circulating in Asia.

Virologists fear that strain could mutate into a form that can pass from human to human easily, causing a lethal pandemic.

Controversy has surrounded the question of whether wild birds can carry H5N1 to domestic poultry. No healthy, migrating wild bird has yet been found to be carrying and shedding the virus.

Move poultry indoors

But domestic ducks can shed it without showing symptoms. Albert Osterhaus of the University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands told New

Scientist that wild birds closely related to domestic ducks, such as the mallard, should be able to carry it.

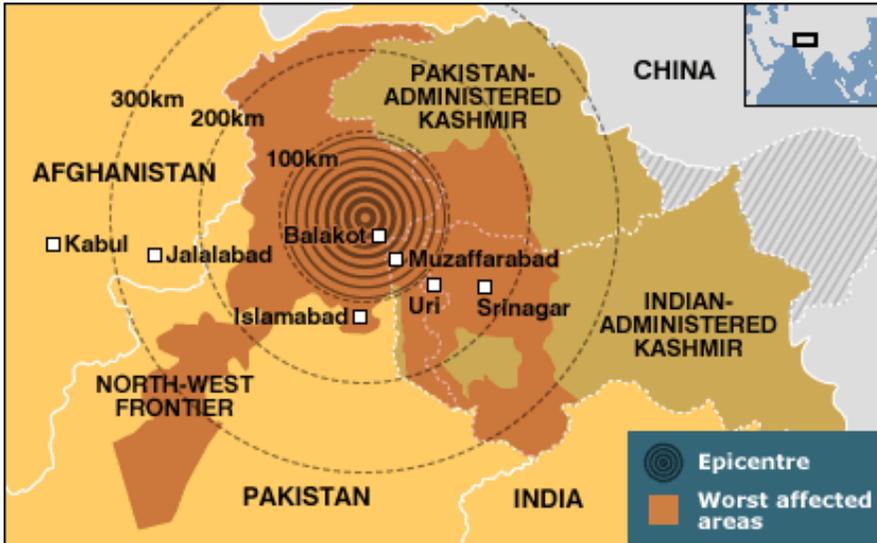
Millions of poultry were killed in the Netherlands to control another bird flu, H7N7, in 2003. Dozens of people were infected with the virus and one died. That outbreak, says Osterhaus, was caused by wild ducks that carried a virus genetically very similar to the outbreak strain, and shared a pond with free-range poultry.

Partly at Osterhaus's urging, the Netherlands ordered farmers to move the country's five million outdoor poultry indoors in August for fear of infection by migratory birds from Russia. But the European Union decided against this, and a month later the Dutch relented and let the birds back outside, though with temporary roofing over poultry yards on migration routes.

Earthquake in Pakistan

Tuesday, October 11, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/10/earthquake-in-pakistan.html>



Map of affected areas

It seems to have been a year of natural disasters... An earthquake in Pakistan has killed at least 33,000 people according to the interior minister. This was the revised death toll after the initial estimate of 20,000. Heavy rain and poor weather has been hampering rescue efforts.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4330488.stm

Quake toll soars as aid falters

At least 33,000 people died in the earthquake which hit Pakistan, the country's interior minister has said, as torrential rain hampers aid efforts.

Aftab Ahmed Sherpao told the BBC the figure had been revised after an initial toll of just under 20,000.

All helicopter flights from Chaklala airbase near Islamabad and other points have been suspended due to heavy rain.

Road deliveries of aid are being hampered by the threat of mudslides as rain lashed the region on Tuesday.

“It is unfortunate that we are compelled to halt our air relief operation due to rains,” Mr Sherpao told the BBC.

New misery

In the ruined town of Balakot, workers with heavy construction equipment who were trying to clear roads said they were concerned about new landslides.

The weather is making it harder for the Pakistani troops as well as the various specialist rescue units that have arrived from Dubai, Japan, Switzerland, China and France, the BBC’s Andrew North reports from the town.

And it is making life even more miserable for the thousands of survivors around the town, many of them with little shelter from the rain, he adds.

At Chaklala airbase, dozens of helicopters carrying relief supplies stood in the downpour awaiting news of the weather.

“They cannot fly until weather is clear here and up in the north and Kashmir,” an official told AFP news agency.

Helicopters – including giant US military Chinooks – had spent the morning making regular flights to bring aid and evacuate the injured from Muzaffarabad, the quake-shattered capital of Pakistan-run Kashmir.

World's oldest noodles

Thursday, October 13, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/10/worlds-oldest-noodles.html>



Remains of the world's oldest noodles

The remains of 4000 year old noodles have been unearthed in an archaeological dig in China. This probably proves without a doubt that noodles were invented in China rather than in Europe or the Middle East; though I have to admit that I didn't even know that the identity of its inventor was in question.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/4335160.stm>

Oldest noodles unearthed in China

The 50cm-long, yellow strands were found in a pot that had probably been buried during a catastrophic flood.

Radiocarbon dating of the material taken from the Lajia archaeological site on the Yellow River indicates the food was about 4,000 years old.

Scientists tell the journal *Nature* that the noodles were made using grains from millet grass – unlike modern noodles, which are made with wheat flour.

The discovery goes a long way to settling the old argument over who first created the string-like food.

Professor Houyuan Lu said: “Prior to the discovery of noodles at Lajia, the earliest written record of noodles is traced to a book written during the East Han Dynasty sometime between AD 25 and 220, although it remained a subject of debate whether the Chinese, the Italians, or the Arabs invented it first.

“Our discovery indicates that noodles were first produced in China,” the researcher from the Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, explained to BBC News.

The professor’s team tells Nature that the ancient settlement at Lajia was hit by a sudden catastrophe.

Among the remains are skeletons thrown into various abnormal postures, suggesting the inhabitants may have been trying to flee the disaster that was enveloping them.

“Based on the geological and archaeological evidence, there was a catastrophic earthquake and immediately following the quake, the site was subject to flooding by the river,” explained co-author Professor Kam-biu Liu, from Louisiana State University, US.

It was in amongst the human wreckage that scientists found an upturned earthenware bowl filled with brownish-yellow, fine clay.

When they lifted the inverted container, the noodles were found sitting proud on the cone of sediment left behind.

“It was this unique combination of factors that created a vacuum or empty space between the top of the sediment cone and the bottom of this bowl that allowed the noodles to be preserved,” Professor Kam-biu Liu said.

The noodles resemble the La-Mian noodle, the team says; a traditional Chinese noodle that is made by repeatedly pulling and stretching the dough by hand.

To identify the plants from which the noodles were made, the team looked at the shape and patterning of starch grains and so-called seed-husk phytoliths in the bowl.

These were compared with modern crops. The analysis pointed to the use of foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*) and broomcorn millet (*Panicum miliaceum*)

“Our data demonstrate that noodles were probably initially made from species of domesticated grasses native to China. This is in sharp contrast to modern Chinese noodles or Italian pasta which are mostly made of wheat today,” Professor Houyuan Lu said.

Harriet Miers – religious nut and crony

Wednesday, October 19, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/10/harriet-miers-religious-nut-and-crony.html>

In an absolutely disgraceful motion, George Bush's has nominated his personal lawyer Harriet Miers to the post. Ms Miers has not had ANY judicial experience and her nomination is nothing more than due to the fact she is a personal friend who shares his brand of evangelicalism (i.e., Christian fundamentalism). It almost seems incredible that in a country founded on the principles of liberty and democracy, such blatant cronyism could be tolerated.

Source articles

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/bush-brings-religion-into-supreme-court-stoush/2005/10/13/1128796653474.html>

Bush brings religion into Supreme Court stoush

By Michael Gawenda Herald Correspondent in Washington

October 14, 2005

With his conservative supporters increasingly questioning his choice of a new justice for the US Supreme Court, President George Bush has said that one reason he picked Harriet Miers was her religious beliefs.

Mr Bush was clearly uncomfortable when a reporter asked why his advisers were telling conservatives that Ms Miers was an evangelical Christian who belonged to a conservative church that is strongly anti-abortion.

"People are interested to know why I picked Harriet Miers," he said. "They want to know Harriet Miers's background. They want to know as much as they possibly can before they form opinions. And part of Harriet Miers's life is her religion."

Mr Bush's comment – clearly made reluctantly; his body language saying he would rather be doing anything other than answer questions from reporters – drew sharp criticism not only from Democrats but also from Republicans and from some evangelical Christian leaders, who all said there should not be a “religious test” for any Supreme Court nominee.

Mr Bush's comment came after James Dobson, a key conservative leader and founder of Focus on the Family, said that Karl Rove, the President's closest adviser, had told him Ms Miers was an “evangelical Christian from a very conservative church which was almost universally pro-life”.

Most observers saw this as an attempt by Mr Rove to signal that Ms Miers would vote to overturn the Supreme Court's *Roe v Wade* decision in 1973 that legalised abortion.

Mr Bush, when he nominated John Roberts as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, refused to answer questions about Justice Roberts's religious beliefs or whether his Catholicism would influence his rulings.

He insisted there could be no religious test for the court, only questions about the nominee's judicial philosophy and legal expertise.

Tony Perkins, the president of the conservative Family Research Council, said Mr Bush should not have talked about Ms Miers's religious convictions and suggested he had mentioned them because “she has no track record as far as judicial philosophy goes”.

The Republican chairman of the Senate judiciary committee, Arlen Specter, threatened to call Mr Rove before the committee during the Miers confirmation hearings in December to ask him exactly what he has been telling people about Ms Miers's religious beliefs.

“There can be no suggestion of secret briefings about the nominee by the White House,” he said. “Whatever needs to be known about Ms Miers needs to be known to the committee and to the American people.”

Patrick Leahy, the senior Democrat on the committee, said: “We don't confirm justices of the Supreme Court on a wink and a nod.”

The opposition to Ms Miers has grown fiercer in recent days, with The Washington Times reporting that 27 of the 55 Republican senators were seriously thinking about voting against confirming Ms Miers for the vacancy left by the moderate Sandra Day O'Connor, the so-called “swing” vote on the court.

Despite the intensifying pressure on him, Mr Bush is highly unlikely to withdraw Ms Miers's nomination, a move that would seriously weaken his presidency.

“I remind people that Harriet Miers has been rated, consistently, one of the top 50 women lawyers in the United States,” he said. “She's eminently qualified for the job and she has a judicial philosophy that I appreciate. Otherwise I wouldn't have named her to the bench.”

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/grovelling-letters-harm-bush-cause/2005/10/12/1128796590185.html>

Grovelling letters harm Bush cause

October 13, 2005

Washington: President George Bush's already uphill struggle to put his nominee, Harriet Miers, in the US Supreme Court has got harder with the publication of personal letters that added weight to charges of cronyism.

Notes that Ms Miers sent to Mr Bush in the late 1990s, when he was Texas governor and she was his personal lawyer, range from deferential to fawning.

In a typical example, she wrote: “You are the best governor ever – deserving of great respect. All I hear is how great you and Laura are doing. Texas is blessed.”

After Mr Bush signed an autograph for a girl during an engagement Ms Miers gushed: “I was struck by the tremendous impact you have on the children whose lives you touch.”

The release of the correspondence by the Texas archives came at the worst time for Mr Bush, as scepticism over Ms Miers spreads in Republican ranks. Many on the

right believe she has not shown herself sufficiently committed to causes such as bans on abortion and gay marriage. Others are queasy about her lack of experience.

It was also revealed on Tuesday that before Mr Bush nominated Ms Miers, his deputy chief of staff, Karl Rove, called an influential Christian leader, James Dobson, to assure him she was a conservative evangelical Christian.

The Guardian, Los Angeles Times

Public hospital crisis driven by staff shortages

Wednesday, October 19, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/10/public-hospital-crisis-driven-by-staff.html>

There was a rather excellent opinion piece submitted by Dr Skinner in the Sydney Morning Herald recently. The so called “bed shortage” crisis in NSW and other parts of Australia is in part driven by an absolute and relative staff shortage. Quite simply, there simply are not enough doctors, especially in junior positions, nurses and allied health to go around to meet demand. The government has in many cases tried to apply the “stick” approach to combat this problem. For example, junior medical staff are mostly forced to work longer and more frequent shifts, or work in a capacity beyond their training. Involuntary secondments to peripheral hospital are the norm. It is no wonder that the vast majority of people try to exit general hospital rotations as quickly as they can; by either entering a specialist training pathway or moving into general practice. The position of a “house medical officer” simply does not exist anymore.

It is useful to look at medical locums from a supply and demand perspective. Though locums are demonised, they would not exist if there was no work for them. The simple fact of the matter is that at this particular time, I could easily work as a locum and earn over twice my current salary. This would be

possible, furthermore, on a regular basis within metropolitan Sydney. For doctors not considering entering a training program, working as a locum provides the flexibility of working hours not available in a salaried position and pay at actual “market rates”. If the public hospital system wants to reduce its reliance of the locum medical service, it must drastically improve working conditions, pay and other incentives.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/opinion/hospitals-must-change-to-staunch-flow-of-staff/2005/10/13/1128796647490.html>

Hospitals must change to staunch flow of staff

October 14, 2005

Doctors, nurses and other workers can be drawn back into the mainstream workforce, writes Clare Skinner.

THE rising use of casual doctors reflects the workforce shortage facing the health system, with chronic vacancies across the system.

The public has been slow to recognise that this lack of medical, nursing and allied health staff is behind the so-called hospital bed crisis, poignantly illustrated in a recent episode of the ABC TV drama MDA in which Bill “Happy” Henderson, suffering from chest pain, wanders through wards full of empty beds while waiting to be seen by an unsupervised intern.

The shortage is both absolute and relative: we do not train enough doctors and, once trained, doctors are not working in areas of greatest need.

Demand for hospital services is rising. As the population ages, the burden of chronic disease grows. The public expects 24-hour, immediate high-level care. Lack of timely access to general practitioners and aged-care services

diverts patients to hospital emergency departments. The allocation of doctors and infrastructure to outer-metropolitan and rural areas has lagged behind the demographic shift. Overlaying this, the threat of litigation looms large, with “defensive medicine”, in which simple problems are extensively investigated, becoming the clinical standard.

The medical workforce has also changed. Postgraduate medical programs introduced in the mid-1990s mean that graduates are older and are likely to have family commitments when they begin internships. Research by the Australian Medical Workforce Advisory Committee shows doctors are seeking flexible work options and are unwilling to work the long hours and involuntary secondments expected in the past.

Medical graduates from the HECS generation have high levels of debt and balk at high costs associated with specialist training. Most importantly, the present crop of junior doctors has more options than ever before.

Casual locum work is a flexible and well-paid alternative to permanent hospital employment. Unlike earlier generations, today's junior doctors are aware of their rights and are willing to vote with their feet.

Is any doctor better than no doctor at all? Smaller hospitals rely heavily on locum staff, who have variable skills and experience and are not subject to credentialling and performance review mechanisms applied to regular hospital employees. A substantial proportion are recent medical graduates choosing to forgo specialist training for the flexible working hours and generous remuneration offered by casual work.

The challenge is attracting them back into the mainstream workforce, rather than forcing them out of medical practice.

The core here is changing the culture of hospital medicine. Despite improvements in clinical and organisational technology, work and training

practices have changed very little in the past 50 years. The apprenticeship model fails because junior doctors are too busy doing paperwork to be involved in more complex clinical assessment and decision-making. The clinical hierarchy is firmly entrenched, creating a communication barrier between junior doctors, patients, nurses, allied health professionals and senior medical staff. Specialist training programs are restrictive and trainees (average age 32.5 years) have little control over their working lives. A culture of blame and embarrassment still exists when dealing with adverse patient outcomes and medical errors.

Low morale in public hospitals must also be addressed. Clinicians at the coalface bear the brunt of “system issues” such as waiting lists and bed shortages yet feel they have no power to address the problems. The goals of administrators and clinicians are disconnected, with key performance indicators such as length of stay driving patient flow, often at the expense of patient care. Patients and the media are quick to criticise following recent high-profile hospital incidents.

Public hospital clinicians work long hours, often in extreme circumstances. We need to work out how to better recognise their efforts and make them feel valued before more of them disappear.

Dr Clare Skinner is a registrar in emergency medicine and the author of the recent Greater Metropolitan Clinical Taskforce report Meeting the Medical Locum Challenge.

A case for Herceptin

Saturday, October 29, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/10/case-for-herceptin.html>

In a recent trial published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, women with HER2 positive breast cancer who received Herceptin (and drug that targets the HER2 receptor) after surgery drastically reduced their risk of cancer recurrence.

Unfortunately, Herceptin is a very expensive drug, apparently up to \$60,000 per patient. Although there is a clear case for the government to subsidise the use of Herceptin for these group of women, I think that the cost-benefit arguments need to be carefully considered.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/health/subsidise-breast-cancer-drug-quickly-say-doctors/2005/10/20/1129401349951.html>

Subsidise breast cancer drug quickly, say doctors

By Julie Robotham, Medical Editor

October 20, 2005

Doctors and patients are escalating their campaign to have the drug Herceptin approved and subsidised for women in the early stages of breast cancer, after a 5000-woman trial showed the drug dramatically cut the chance of relapse after surgery.

The results were released earlier this year at a conference, but authorities then argued they could not depend on them because the full statistics had not been through the scientific review process. Along with the findings from

two other Herceptin trials, the study is published today in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

John Forbes, group co-ordinator of the Australian New Zealand Breast Cancer Trials Group, said: "I think it will definitely move things forward. The [Therapeutic Goods Administration] should be able to consider this reasonably promptly."

Professor Forbes, who supervised the treatment of more than 100 Australian women in the international trial, said medicines authorities evaluated new drugs rigorously, but they should also have flexibility to expedite exceptional new therapies.

"It's a one-off ... it's the most important data we've had in breast cancer [treatment] in a quarter of a century," he said.

The trial showed that for women with early breast cancer who tested positive to a genetic variation called HER2, the drug – in combination with another form of chemotherapy – reduced their chances of having a recurrence from 22.6 per cent over the next two years to 14.6 per cent. Professor Forbes said this would certainly improve their survival, though the two-year follow-up could not demonstrate that conclusively because most women lived at least that long regardless of the form of treatment.

Herceptin costs about \$60,000 to treat each patient. In Australia it is funded only for women whose cancer has spread, in whom it may extend their life by several months.

Alan Coates, head of the Cancer Council Australia, said the funding body the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee appeared sympathetic to prompt consideration of the new data. "I think there's some goodwill to do it rapidly," he said.

Under normal evaluation processes, it would take until 2008 to win taxpayer funding, he said.

“Four thousand women would miss out,” Professor Coates said. More than 10,000 new breast cancer diagnoses are made in Australia each year, and 20 per cent are HER2 positive.

New laws turn Australia into a “secret state”

Saturday, October 29, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/10/new-laws-turn-australia-into-secret.html>

The new proposed ASIO legislation turns Australia into a virtual secret state. On suspicion alone, ASIO officers and police will be able to hold you without charge, and not tell anyone about it including your spouse. Furthermore, after the ordeal, you will be gagged by a secrecy order. The so called safeguards to these new sweeping powers consist of little more than turning the judiciary into (as I read recently) “automatons for the executive”. The requirement for a judge to sign the order is nothing more than a cynical attempt to give these new powers a veneer of independent review.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser recently gave an excellent lecture in Melbourne on the new proposed legislation that was published as an opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2005/10/19/1129401313470.html>

Laws for a secret state without any safeguards

October 20, 2005

The new ASIO legislation overturns long-held concepts of basic justice, says Malcolm Fraser.

Today's world is preoccupied with terrorism. How we in Democracies respond is critical to the maintenance of our own values and to the ideals of liberty. There is a danger that Islam, which is essentially a peaceful religion, will be blamed for the actions of terrorists and that we will be increasingly divided by religion and race.

We need to understand that terrorism is as old as the human race.

The Crusaders from Britain who fought against Islam in the Middle Ages; the Spanish Inquisition; the IRA and the Protestant militias in Ireland all practised terrorism; all were Fundamentalist in their beliefs; the Chechnians wanting independence, are terrorists. People in some parts of the Philippines who want independence, were once called Communists, then Freedom Fighters are now called terrorists. The Basques in Spain; the Belgians in the Congo; the Portuguese and Spaniards in Central and South America; the Red Army and the Red Brigades in Germany and Italy in the late seventies and early eighties were all terrorists.

These groups were mostly fundamental in their attitudes. They all practised terrorism.

Many in today's world say Islamic Fundamentalists have no cause and no purpose but hatred and destruction of the West. In a major speech to his own Labour Party last year, Prime Minister Tony Blair made that point but on the very next page he said that peace between Israel and Palestine would do more to end terrorism than all the bullets in the world. Both statements cannot be true. The second is true.

Many believe the war in Iraq has provided a new motivation for terrorists, to end the occupation of an Islamic country by an infidel army.

To understand that there are different causes of terrorism is not to condone but is essential if we wish to overcome and end terrorism.

Because civilisation as we know it was so nearly destroyed during the Second World War, in its aftermath, leaders of all major states believed they must strive and work to achieve a better world.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was agreed in 1948. In the years since, protocols and conventions established under it were designed to build a law-based world. The International Criminal Court finally came into force on 1 July 2002. This was a further major step in that direction.

It is more than unfortunate that our response to terrorism has reversed much of that progress and leaders in too many countries do not seem to understand that that is happening.

I want to look briefly at the response of Britain, of the United States and of Australia.

In Britain, the government had attempted to put asylum seekers permanently in jail if they were not successful in their claims and if they could not be returned to their country of origin. The Law Lords made it plain that jail of more than a few weeks was inappropriate under British law. Unless the detainees had to be charged and tried. A compromise was reached which involved judicial and parliamentary oversight.

Since the London bombings the United Kingdom has sharpened some aspects of its laws against terrorism, especially laws in relation to aliens. It seems to have done this however, with greater discussion and openness than we have had in Australia.

In the United States, long before war was declared on Iraq, members of the Administration, especially from the Justice Department, the Pentagon, the State Department and the White House, began an involved paper trail which sought to define how far interrogators could go in "intrusive questioning".

Their purpose was to avoid charges of torture under United States or International Law, or to avoid being in breach of the Geneva Conventions.

The US Administration published these papers. They are put together in a large document called the Torture Papers by the New York University Center for Law and Security, published by Cambridge Press. These papers were before Iraq, designed to define the treatment that could be metered out to prisoners taken from Afghanistan. The papers were intended to place such prisoners beyond the reach of any law and to provide immunity for the jailers.

President Bush came out of it with credit. He signed a short note which said “any interrogation must be humane” – he did not elaborate. Colin Powell argued that to torture prisoners would place American servicemen at risk and, on that practical rather than on an ethical ground, he argued against the practices.

A State Department lawyer, William Taft argued fervently against torture. Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee argued that if you caused major organ failure or death, it would be torture but short of that, it almost certainly wasn't. Former Assistant Attorney-General Bybee is now a judge.

Attorney-General Gonzales in his confirmation hearings before the United States Senate, claimed that he was opposed to torture, but he signed a piece of paper, which appears in the Torture Papers, which many would construe as endorsing torture. The Justice Department has most to be ashamed of in its perversion of both domestic and international law in relation to torture.

Torture began to be outlawed as reliable evidence by British Courts in the 1500s. For a long while now domestic jurisdictions and international law have outlawed torture absolutely. We cannot take one step along that path. To take one leads to many. To its credit, the Supreme Court of the State of Israel in 1999 made a judgement that torture was outside the law in all

circumstances. On practical grounds it is recognised as the most unreliable means of extracting evidence, but on moral and ethical grounds it betrays the core belief of our existence. By acceptance of torture too many have stepped into a darker past.

General Taguba's report, and the Red Cross report on Guantanamo Bay, both use careful language, as one would expect. But it was clear that abuse was pervasive and substantial. Long before Abu Ghraib, it was possible to see how every violation of decent behaviour, later revealed at Abu Ghraib, had its origins in high level memorandum, passed between the highest organs of United States Administration.

There was a clear attempt to place prisoners taken by the Northern Alliance and handed over to the Americans outside the reach of any law of any human decency. They were described as "unlawful combatants". The Taliban were described as a "failed state" which Colin Powell pointed out was wrong because the United States had always held all states and in particular, Afghanistan to their international obligations.

Torture has been further reinforced as a technique by the expanded Rendition programmes, which most recently brought American authorities into sharp conflict with the Italian government.

A Canadian citizen had earlier been taken to Egypt and was only released 12 months later, after the most vigorous Canadian protests. There is no point in the Rendition Programme unless it is to place prisoners in a jurisdiction where they can be tortured.

One of the Australians at Guantanamo Bay reportedly spent six months in Egypt on his way to Guantanamo. He has since been released without charge. The Australian Government claimed that it had approached the Egyptian authorities who had no record of him entering or leaving the

country. Egyptian immigration authorities would not be lined up to record people who were taken off an American executive jet to an Egyptian jail under the Rendition programme.

The United States' response has also involved the establishment of special Military Tribunals. There is a body of opinion, which has condemned those Tribunals as lacking basic justice. These include Lord Goldsmith, First Law Officer of Britain, who said that they would not provide justice required for a British citizen. As a consequence the United Kingdom persuaded the United States to return British citizens held in Guantanamo Bay to Britain. One of the Federal Courts in the United States has ruled Military Tribunals unconstitutional on the grounds that prisoners were not told the evidence against them and on the grounds that the tribunals accepted evidence taken under torture.

Major Robert Preston and Captain John Carr, both within the United States system and both Prosecutors, condemned the process as not providing a reasonable basis for a just trial. Captain Paul Willey, head of Australia's Military Bar and Navy Reservist has also been heavily critical of the process. The President of the Law Council of Australia has described the attitude of the Australian Government as an outrage. Geoffrey Robertson, QC has joined in the criticism. He suggested that an Australian should be required to sit as Judge with the Military Tribunal. There are two problems with that suggestion. The United States would not accept it and secondly, no reputable Australian judge would take part in the proceedings of those Military Tribunals. Prof Tim McCormack, Australian Red Cross Professor of Humanitarian Law at Melbourne University and one of the drafters of the Statutes of the International Criminal Court, and adviser to the War Crimes Tribunal at the Hague has said that at the very least Hicks deserves the same standard of justice that is being provided for former President Milosevic of Yugoslavia.

The weight of opinion and the weight of evidence is overwhelming. The rules for the conduct of the Tribunals, their lack of independence, the lack of a judicial appeal, deserve condemnation from all of us.

The United States has a Bill of Rights and so their legal system has come into play.

The courts have ruled that people in Guantanamo Bay must have their day in court. Unfortunately it has not yet taken the step of confirming that the Tribunals are unconstitutional.

Australia has supported the military tribunals. The Government has said that Hicks will get justice, but the majority of opinion is against the Government which unlike the British Government has abandoned its own citizen. We have, by implication, supported the Rendition Programme and therefore have not opposed torture.

The ASIO legislation of 2002 underlines Australia's official indifference to "due process" and to what until recently would have been regarded as universally accepted Rule of Law.

We are the only democratic country, I am advised, to legislate for the detention of people whom the authorities do not suspect of any wrong doing or even of any wrong thought.

In Australia, any of us can be detained merely because authorities believe we might know something that we don't even know we know. The authorities do not have to believe we are guilty of any crime, or are planning any crime, or have consorted with any suspicious persons. How could such a law be drafted by the Government and supported by the Labor opposition? You can be detained for one week but then on a new warrant, another and another and another week. Unless it is approved in the original warrant, and why

would ASIO do that? – you are not allowed to contact your wife, your husband, your child, your mother, your father and of course not a lawyer.

If you don't answer ASIO's questions satisfactorily, you can be charged and subject to 5 years in jail. But the law is reasonable, it goes on to say that if you don't know anything, then it's not an offence not to tell ASIO anything!!! But you have to prove you didn't know anything and so the "onus of proof" is reversed.

You can be asked to produce a paper and if you don't, you also go to jail on prosecution for 5 years but the law goes on to say, being fair-minded again, if you don't have such a paper, it's not an offence not to produce it but you have to prove that you didn't have it. How do you prove that you do not have something that you do not even know exists!!! Again, the "onus of proof" is reversed.

If a journalist heard that you had been detained and sought to report it, he would go to jail for 5 years. If a detained person were released and talked to anyone about his or her experiences, subject to prosecution, five years in jail.

This seems to be a law for secret behaviour by authorities, for making somebody disappear. It is a law that one would expect in tyrannical countries and not in Australia. Do we do nothing about it because we believe it will not apply to ourselves? Do we believe it is only going to apply to people of a different religion who look a bit different?

United States authorities and others have, time and again, denigrated those in Guantanamo Bay. We have been told they are the worst of the worst, that they are terrible people, that they do not deserve the normal protection of the law.

People who make such comments clearly do not understand or believe in the Rule of Law as it has evolved through the ages. They have taken such views

because they believe those in Guantanamo Bay and others are not “people” like ourselves. In a different day and a different time, but within the memories of many, we have heard those words before.

In other words the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, the presumption that all people should have access to “due process” in a properly constituted legal system is no longer valid in Australia.

It is not reasonable just to blame the Government alone for such laws. The Labor Party approved such laws.

There was one change of particular significance so I give credit for that. The original legislation applied to people of any age, even to children, except that intrusive strip searching should not take place of a girl under 10. The Labor Party took the view that the legislation should only apply to adults. It now applies to those over 18.

As a consequence of the Government and the Opposition basically agreeing, Australian law already provides for the abolition of “due process”, of Habeas Corpus and the presumption of innocence.

All this is already law.

Australian Law or lack of it has already failed many individuals and groups. Amongst these we can include: Aboriginals; people held in the Department of Immigration detention centres; an Australian citizen deported; Australian citizens wrongly held in detention centres without medical attention; a United States citizen deported without “due process” and an Australian citizen being tried before a Military Tribunal. By the detention of the innocent, by the questioning of people known to be innocent by the authorities, by the right confirmed by the High Court with a majority of 4 to 3, to keep a failed asylum seeker in jail for the term of his natural life, if he could not be returned to his land of origin.

Authorities in Australia already have the capacity for the exercise of extreme and arbitrary power without adequate judicial safeguards.

Much of this involves the gravest failure of administrative and ministerial responsibilities. As shown in the Palmer and Comrie Reports the Department of Immigration has been at the centre of much of it. Two Ministers have been in charge, neither Minister is responsible. As far as one can tell, nobody has been held accountable. The people involved appear not to have mattered to the Administration or to the Government.

Australia now has new proposals in front of it providing even greater power to the police and to the Government. Attention should in particular be turned to those provisions that allow for “preventative detention” and the use of “control orders” to arrest and to limit and monitor the activities of individuals. No cogent case has been made for the expansion of these powers, except a general one that it is necessary to fight terrorism. It would be reasonable to ask why, it would be reasonable to expect a considered answer.

The legislation says that a control order may be sought if, on the balance of probabilities the order would substantially assist in preventing a terrorist act, or if the person has provided training or received training from a listed terrorist organisation and furthermore, on the balance of probabilities that the order is reasonably necessary to protect the public from a terrorist act.

The intelligence rationale for a “control order” is not easy to grasp. If surveillance is thorough why not watch the person, collect more evidence and then charge the person with an offence?

One consequence of a “control order” would be the immediate disappearance of all the subject’s contacts and collaborators. They would

know from their point of view that something was wrong, they would fade away and disappear.

The terms of the legislation are broad. One of the grounds for a “control order” is that a person has provided training to or has received training from a listed terrorist organisation. Does the organisation need to be listed when the training was received? Does the training have to be recent, could it have occurred 20 years ago in different times and different circumstances?

In one respect more severe problems arise in relation to detention orders. A person can be detained for a limited period if there are reasonable grounds to suspect the person will engage in a terrorist act, or has done or will do an act in preparation for, or planning of a terrorist act. Again the terms are broad.

There is no involvement of a court in achieving authority for a “prevention order”. An issuing authority is appointed by the Minister.

In the draft legislation an issuing of authority is defined as: the Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police, or a member of the Australian Federal Police above the rank of Superintendent. For continued “preventative detention” the issuing authority is a Federal Magistrate or a Judge but acting in a personal capacity, not presiding over a court.

The same questions arise once “preventative detention” is applied, a person’s collaborators, colleagues, will again know from their point of view that something was seriously wrong and they would fade away.

If there was valid grounds for concern, why not double surveillance, collect more information, which would enable a charge and a prosecution to be laid. The strategy of “control orders” and “preventative detention” may have some relevance but the case has not been made. Furthermore the lack of judicial

involvement in the application for “preventative detention” is a total derogation of justice.

There appears to be no involvement of the judiciary in application of a “preventative detention” order and secondly, the involvement of legal officers in the case of continued “preventative detention” is marginal, and would be totally ineffective. No legal officer would in those circumstances be prepared to second guess the policeman. In reality, “preventative detention” and continued “preventative detention” can be imposed solely on the involvement of ASIO and the police.

Do we really believe these powers will be effective in the fight against terrorism, or do we believe that the powers themselves are likely to lead to a sense of grievance of alienation? These are powers whose breadth and arbitrary nature, with lack of judicial oversight, should not exist in any democratic country. If one says, but they will not be abused, I do not agree. If arbitrary power exists they will be abused.

All this has happened in a country which has not experienced a significant terrorist incident for many years. What would be our Government’s reaction if this great city were tied up and disorganised by terrorist attacks similar to those which recently occurred in London?

The Government is really saying on these issues, trust us, but no part of the history of the Coalition’s invasion and occupation of Iraq gives any member of that coalition the right to say on these issues: “Trust us”. We were told there were weapons of mass destruction. There weren’t. The British were led to believe that weapons of mass destruction could be dropped on London within 45 minutes. They could not and the authorities knew they could not.

More recently published British Cabinet Papers have made it clear that President Bush had made the decision to go to war seven or eight months before the American people were told.

During the time when Dr Hans Blix, Executive Chairman UN Monitoring, Verification & Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) was painstakingly revealing the truth about weapons of mass destruction, or the lack of them in Iraq, the United States had no intention of allowing that process to continue, to conclude. They did not indeed want it to conclude because it would have taken away the primary cause for war – a decision which had already been made.

More particularly after the Tampa, after the Children Overboard, the experience and treatment of asylum seekers, the abandonment of Hicks, all suggest that any right to trust has been long destroyed. Would Cornelia Rau trust the Government? Would Vivian Solon trust the Government? Concerning the Tampa and Children Overboard, the Government knew they were playing to the more fearful and conservative elements in the Australian community and with great success. The Government also knows in relation to terrorism that the public is concerned, even fearful and can be made more fearful. These laws again play to conservative elements in Australian society.

It may be brilliant politics but will such laws make Australia secure? By its actions, the Government has long abandoned and lost the middle ground. The Rule of Law and “due process” has been set aside. Has the Government already created an environment in which people will accept too much if the Government says it will help in the fight against terrorism?

These new proposals should be opposed. No strong case has been made that these breaches in the Rule of Law will be effective in the fight against terrorism. The London bombings are probably used as a rationale, but apply these laws to London bombings, they could not succeed. The laws should be opposed on the basis of substance. The powers are arbitrary altering the quality of ASIO and of the police in significant ways. There are no real safe guards, there is no adequate judicial review.

The laws should be opposed because the process itself is seriously flawed. Instead of wide ranging discussion the Government has sought to nobble the field in secret and to prevent debate. The laws should be opposed because they provide arbitrary power which would be dependent on trust, a trust that has not been earned.

Western civilisation is again betrayed by the treatment metered out to prisoners at Abu Ghraib and at Guantanamo Bay. We are told that this was the view of a few misguided, low-level troops but Donald Gregg, former National Security Advisor to the first President Bush, wrote that the memorandum, published in the Torture Papers: “cleared the way for the horrors that had been revealed in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo that make a mockery of Administration assertions that a few misguided enlisted personnel perpetrated the vile abuse of prisoners. I can think of nothing that can more devastatingly undercut America’s standing in the world or more importantly our view of ourselves than those decisions.”

The Government and the Labor Party have both assumed that we cannot fight terrorism and adhere to the basic principles of justice and democracy. They have assumed that certain people are outside the law and do not deserve justice. They are already saying to us “Trust us” on the issue. I suggest they have given us every reason not to trust them on these issues of peace and war and on security for our people.

From Australia, our Government has constantly said that our participation in the Coalition in Iraq has not increased the risk of terrorist attacks in Australia. But the former head of ASIO, Dennis Richardson, and the former Chief of the Defence Force Staff, General Cosgrove, have both suggested the contrary.

Professor Naomi Chazan said, in the recent Gandel Oration in Melbourne: “There is one standard and one standard for all, and the challenge that is posed by terrorism is how to defend the rights of those that we don’t agree

with? How can we defend the rights, the basic human and civil rights, of those whose ideas we simply abhor?"

Unless we do so, the terrorists have already had a significant victory. It is not enough to say we believe in justice, in human rights for those who agree with us, for those whom we classify as honourable and law abiding citizens. It is the system, the process, the courts, it is the measurement of justice that determines the nature of our civilisation.

Churchill put it this way:

He suggested that the great privilege

"of Habeas Corpus, and of trial by jury, which are the supreme protection invented by the English people for ordinary individuals against the State – the power of the executive to send a man into prison without formulating any charge known to the law and particularly to deny him the judgement of his peers – is, in the highest degree, odious and is the foundation of all totalitarian governments.. extraordinary powers assumed by the Executive with the consent of Parliament in emergencies should be yielded up, when and as, the emergency declines. This is really the test of civilisation."

Thomas Paine said:

"He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his own enemy from oppression, for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach to himself."

That is succinct and accurate advice. It is an expression of what has happened through the course of history. If we stand silent in the face of discrimination and in violation of the basic principles of humanity, then we betray our own principles and our way of life. We must fight extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism, whatever its origins, whatever its objectives.

Fundamentalism has, throughout history, often been represented by an extreme and arbitrary belief, often without justice and without principles which make it possible for us to lead our lives as part of a civilised community. I regret that many, who almost certainly mean well have so little faith in our freedom, in our democracy, in our laws, that they believe they must throw basic rights overboard to defend those same rights. Such views are wrong and will make it harder to overcome terrorism.

This is the full text of the Stephen Murray-Smith Memorial Lecture, presented by former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, at the State Library of Victoria on October 19, 2005.

The beginnings of cybernetics

Monday, October 31, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/10/beginnings-of-cybernetics.html>

In the past decade or two, medical researchers have started to probe the frontiers of cybernetics. It has usually been in the context of providing some sort of symptomatic relief for an otherwise untreatable condition, e.g., electrical stimulation of various parts of the brain for control of chronic pain or end-stage Parkinson's disease.

A group of British researchers have found a similar application for something perhaps rather more generally applicable. By stimulating various parts of the brain and brainstem, the researchers could either increase or decrease blood pressure. Given that blood pressure can be easily and reasonably controlled with medications and neurosurgical procedures are dangerous, this is not a discovery that will have any particular effect in the short or medium term. However, I would predict that in the future, perhaps with nanomachine "implants", this may well be a common (perhaps even preferred) way of managing blood pressure abnormalities.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4361802.stm>

Electrodes lower blood pressure

Stimulating parts of the brain with electrodes can change a patient's blood pressure, researchers have found.

Although this may seem a drastic way to treat hypertension, the authors say it could help in most extreme cases where conventional therapy has failed.

It also sheds light on where in the brain blood pressure is controlled which could lead to new treatments.

The findings from Imperial College London and Oxford University are published in Neuroreport.

The team of neurosurgeons and physiologists discovered the blood pressure effects while fitting brain electrodes to 15 patients for pain control.

Deep brain stimulation involves placing very thin electrodes on very exact locations in the brain and is already used to relieve pain and to help Parkinson's disease patients with their movement.

The researchers found that they could make patients' blood pressure increase or decrease by stimulating very specific regions of the brain with the electrodes – the dorsal or ventral periventricular and periaqueductal grey matter, respectively.

Lead author of the paper Alexander Green said: "Obviously, as this is brain surgery, we have to proceed with great caution.

"It would initially only be warranted in those patients for whom drug treatments just aren't working.

New therapies

"However, other research groups are working on less invasive methods of stimulating exact locations in the brain, for example using nanotechnology, and if this becomes available then the treatment would be attractive to a much larger number of people."

In the UK, about one in five people, at least 10 million, have high blood pressure or hypertension.

Professor Peter Weissberg, medical director at the British Heart Foundation, said: “It has been known for some time that the brain can affect blood pressure.

“Although this research will help us understand better which parts of the brain are involved in blood pressure control, it is unlikely that this approach would be used to control high blood pressure in most heart patients because we already have other effective and well tolerated medicines available to us.

“However, a very small number of patients have postural hypotension – a fall in blood pressure upon standing up – which can be debilitating and difficult to treat with existing medicines. This research may open up new avenues to treat these heart patients.”

November 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

More moons around Pluto

November 03, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/more-moons-around-pluto.html>



Pluto (centre) is the first object in the outer solar system known to have multiple satellites

Pluto was known to have one large moon previous, Charon. Now, the Hubble Space Telescope has discovered to more small moons orbiting Pluto! It seems that this year quite a few discoveries have been made in the outer Solar System with the two additional “possible” planets announced a few months earlier.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8243&feedId=online-news_rss20

Two new moons discovered around Pluto

- 11:56 01 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Maggie McKee

Two tiny additional moons have been found around Pluto, making it the first object in the outer solar system known to have multiple satellites. But how the moons got there remains a mystery.

Astronomers discovered a large moon, Charon, around Pluto in 1978. But no further moons were found until now, when a team using the Hubble Space Telescope spotted two faint objects around the distant planet, which lies in a vast ring of icy bodies called the Kuiper Belt.

The discovery is “impressive because Pluto has been studied so intensively in the past”, says David Jewitt, a planetary scientist at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu, who was not involved in the research.

The moons, designated S/2005 P1 and S/2005 P2, appear to be just 140 kilometres and 125 km wide, respectively, although their exact sizes will remain uncertain until astronomers determine how much sunlight their surfaces reflect. They lie about twice as far from Pluto as Charon does, with the smaller object about 49,000 km from its host planet and the larger moon at a distance of about 65,000 km.

And based on the new observations, taken in May 2005 – and Hubble images from 2002 that the team recently re-analysed – the moons appear at this stage to orbit Pluto on circular paths, in the same plane as Charon.

Blown away

“That gives us a clue that they were formed in the same event as Charon,” says team member Bill Merline at the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado, US. He says a large object may have collided with Pluto soon after the solar system formed, about 4 billion years ago, and that the three moons may have coalesced from the resulting debris.

But other astronomers are stymied over how to explain the process. “I have to admit to being blown away by this discovery,” says Mike Brown of the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, US.

He says the objects would have formed relatively close to Pluto in such a collision, then gradually moved outwards. “It’s very difficult to form [all three] without Charon disrupting the other two,” Brown told New Scientist.

Lonely wanderers

Merline agrees that their formation is uncertain. He says the newly discovered moons could have taken shape in separate collisions from the one that formed Charon or that they were simply bodies that became gravitationally captured when they wandered too close to Pluto.

If the latter is true, “perhaps we have to rethink the environment in which Pluto formed”, says David Rabinowitz, a planetary scientist at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, US. If there was more gas than expected left over from the formation of the solar system, he says it may have been easier for objects to interact gravitationally.

“The most important thing is to find out if they are actually in circular orbits,” says Brown, adding that captured objects are more likely to be on non-circular orbits. “Once we know that, it will either be clear that they were captured, or we’ll be even more confused” by a possible impact.

Glaring Sun

The Sun is now between the Earth and Pluto, making observations of the distant object difficult. But astronomers will use Hubble again, as well as a number of other space and ground-based telescopes, from February 2006, when Pluto re-emerges from the Sun's glare. They will confirm the moons' orbits and measure their surface reflectivity.

Those searches are unlikely to turn up more satellites around Pluto because Hubble probably would have found any objects larger than 20 km across, the limit of its vision over the distance.

About 10% of all Kuiper Belt Objects appear to boast a moon. And Brown, who recently discovered a moon around each of two large KBOs, says he will now "go back and take a very, very careful look to see if perhaps there are other moons around our objects that might have been missed".

Americans start to see the real Bush

Saturday, November 05, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/americans-start-to-see-real-bush.html>

It has always been somewhat of a mystery to the rest of the world on why internal domestic support for Bush has been so high. I have recently starting reading Noam Chomsky's "Hegemony or Survival" and it has become somewhat clearer to me. The man off the street hasn't got a chance against the White House propaganda machine.

Be that as it may, Bush's innate ineptitude has finally started catching up with him. With all that is in the political establishment in his favour, if he even had the slightest modicum of leadership ability, the facade of a "great leader" could be maintained. What I wish is that the critical eye of history will deem G W Bush as the fool that he is.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/world/trust-in-bushs-integrity-disintegrates/2005/11/04/1130823398549.html>

Trust in Bush's integrity disintegrates

By Richard Morin and Dan Balz in Washington

November 5, 2005

For the first time in George Bush's presidency a majority of Americans question his integrity, and growing doubts about his leadership have left him with record negative ratings on the economy, Iraq and even the war on terrorism in a Washington Post-ABC News poll.

The survey found that Mr Bush has never been less popular with the American people – 39 per cent approve of the job he is doing as president, while 60 per cent disapprove, the highest level of disapproval recorded for Mr Bush in such polls.

Almost the only bright spot for Mr Bush in the survey was the generally favourable reaction to his latest Supreme Court nominee, Samuel Alito. Half of Americans said Mr Alito should be confirmed by the Senate and fewer than a third viewed him as too conservative, the poll found.

The survey underscores how several pillars of Mr Bush's presidency have begun to crumble. His approval ratings have been in decline for months, but on issues of personal trust, honesty and values he has suffered some of his most notable declines.

Mr Bush had always retained majority support for his handling of the campaign against terrorism – until now, when 51 per cent registered disapproval.

The survey found that only 40 per cent now view him as honest and trustworthy, a 13 percentage point drop in the past 18 months, while 58 per cent said they had doubts about Mr Bush's honesty, the first time in his presidency that more than half the country has questioned his personal integrity.

The indictment of Lewis Libby, vice president Dick Cheney's former chief of staff, added to the burden of an administration reeling from a failed Supreme Court nomination, dissatisfaction with the economy and bloodshed in Iraq. More than half the people surveyed said the Libby charges signalled the presence of deeper ethical wrongdoing in the Administration.

The Washington Post

The Contrarian

Sunday, November 06, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/contrarian.html>

“The Contrarian” aka Andrew West, writes a regular blog for The Sydney Morning Herald. Although I don’t agree with some of his points of view, he does have a refreshing opinion and is not a sycophant to the “establishment” (i.e., right-wing neo-liberalism). It is highly recommended reading.



The Contrarian: Andrew West

One of his most recent pieces is on the hypocrisy of US foreign policy (and policy makers) of which I almost entirely agree with.

Source article

http://blogs.smh.com.au/thecontrarian/archives/2005/11/idealists_versu_1.html

“Idealists” versus “Realists”: in the end, there ain’t much difference

Thursday, November 3, 2005 – 05:44 AM

One of the favourite parlour games of the American foreign policy elite is to divide themselves into “realists” and “idealists”, as though there’s really much difference. The point is that no matter what label they adopt, they all place the US “national interest”, which is to say the corporate interest, above everything else.

This is the central theme of a profile of former US National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, which appears in a recent edition of *The New Yorker*. Unfortunately the writer, the otherwise excellent Jeffrey Goldberg, has fallen for the scam that places Scowcroft, an heir to Henry Kissinger school of “pragmatic diplomacy”, in direct confrontation with the neo-conservatives who “masterminded” the current war in Iraq.

The neocons, such as current Secretary of State Condi Rice and former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, are supposed to be wide-eyed idealists, ready to export democracy to every corner of the globe. What tosh.

In truth, you can barely slide a cigarette paper between the two groups because, in the end, they’ll both do whatever is necessary is to advance the narrow interest of Wall Street. Not Main Street, mind you, because regular America only provides the on-ground personnel for these ventures, the people who actually risk their lives on hostile foreign soil.

The “realists” will only commit troops when they are guaranteed of victory. That was essentially Colin Powell’s doctrine when he was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. You only go in with minimal risk and when the broad strategic goal – i.e., America’s national security – is worth it. So in the case of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, when 800,000 Tutsis and Hutu sympathisers were massacred – you simply ignore it as too hard, not worth the trouble, as Scowcroft does.

The “idealists” are willing to commit to a bloody war that will kill lots of people on both sides for what they claim are purely democratic goals. Well, they’re democratic in the cases that suit the neocons.

Robert Mugabe has turned Zimbabwe, until a decade ago the breadbasket of southern Africa, into a disaster zone, but the neocons aren’t advocating a humanitarian intervention there. Saudi Arabia, with its state-sanctioned public beheadings and amputations, is a human rights atrocity, but the

House of Saud remains a faithful friend of the Bush White House – and the Bush family.

The big test of the “idealist” project is when they’re ready to put boots on the ground for a purely altruistic, humanitarian goal. That is, the U.S. gets nothing, zero, zilch out of the venture. I actually don’t accept the simplistic argument that the Iraq war was only about oil. But it was about setting up the region with a sympathetic government that would throw the country’s doors open for business.

I’ll accept the “idealist” project when the US administration and business groups stop referring to Iraq as an “exciting emerging market”.

I’ll accept the “idealist” project when they say to the Iraqis or any other “liberated” peoples, you can have your resources to do with as you wish – nationalise them, sell them to the Russians, the Canadians or the Australians, lock us out of the market entirely, if you want – we are here to secure you one thing: the vote.

Yes, the Iraqis have braved the terrorists to vote, but, please, don’t try to tell us that’s all the neocons ever wanted. Don’t try to tell us there are no strings attached.

The wrath of Saddam

Sunday, November 06, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/wrath-of-saddam.html>

I had always been somewhat concerned with the fact that a third of Americans actually believe that WMDs were found in Iraq (there were no WMDs found). However, reading a blog by Bob Harris, perhaps this is only just the tip of the vast pool of freaky beliefs of the American public...

“So one-third of Americans mistakenly think we found WMDs? Great. We can work with that. After looking at these numbers, ***I’m just relieved 30 percent don’t think Saddam’s disembodied wraith is looming in a vengeful stormfront, ready to deflower the womenfolk, lead our children into Satan’s bosom, and force the men to read science books.***”

Source article

http://www.thismodernworld.com/weblog/mtarchives/week_2003_06_15.html#000779

Only 22 percent think Saddam used WMDs?

(Note: this entry posted by Bob Harris)

By now you’ve seen the recent poll which finds that a third of Americans mistakenly believe that WMDs were found in Iraq, and about 22 percent think Iraq actually used WMDs during the war.

Sounds bad, right? But let’s put these figures in perspective, courtesy a quick visit over to PollingReport.com, where I pulled out a few numbers, all from recent major polls, just for fun:

Of American adults, at least 18 years of age...

65% couldn't describe the basic facts about Watergate

56% think in war, the media should support the government over questioning it

48% say the news media acted responsibly during the Clinton Wars

45% characterized Watergate was "just politics"

43% attended religious services in the previous 7 days

40% believe the media was biased in favor of Bill Clinton

35% say the government should not fund stem cell research

34% think Rock and Roll has had an overall negative impact on America

33% believe a wife should "submit herself graciously" to a husband

30% say the Bible is the "actual word of God" to be taken literally

29% think people will be "more likely" to afford college for their kids in 2020

28% disapprove of labor unions on principle

28% say the government should have the right to control news reports

27% believe divorce is "morally wrong"

26% thought various disasters in 1999 might "foreshadow the wrath of God"

26% think grade-school teachers should be allowed to spank their kids

24% describe themselves as interested in what celebrities think

21% told a pollster they'd never met that they had cheated in a relationship

21% say justice was served in the O.J. Simpson case

20% approve of the how the Catholic Church handles pedophilia

20% believe that the killing of civilians in Vietnam was "relatively rare"

15% were upset at Diana Spencer's death like "someone you knew"

12% think the United States should have a British-style royal family

11% stockpiled food and water in advance of Y2K

11% think "Titanic" was the best American movie of the 20th century

11% would like "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman" as their personal physician

10% would eat a rat or an insect on a "reality" TV show

10% think it's advantageous to be a woman in American society

10% believe Oswald acted alone

10% say they are "very likely" to become rich someday

8% could not name a single TV network

8% fear they are “very likely” to be shot or badly hurt by a stranger

7% think Elvis is possibly still alive

6% say Garth Brooks is the best male singer of the 20th century

5% are ?very afraid? of thunder and lightning

5% would be “more likely” to buy food labeled as genetically modified

3% wanted to see the questions on “Millionaire” become less difficult

So... what to make of all this?

1) A measurable percentage of Americans will say pretty much any damn thing you can imagine.

2) Looking at the other opinions floating around 20 percent, I'd say that the extent of lunatic public perception of WMDs is, if anything, surprisingly low, given the constant drumbeat of bullshit coming out of the White House and megaphoned by the press for much of the past year.

3) About the same number of people who think it's an advantage to be a woman in America would eat a rat on live TV. Clearly, we've got some work to do on the whole gender-equality thing.

4) Speaking of social progress, there sure seems to be a remarkably consistent hardcore of about 25-30 percent who seem to be living sometime in the late 19th century at best. *Beatings as a form of education? Wives submitting graciously? Vengeful gods screwing with the weather?*

Gallup really ought to quiz these people in a little more detail; after all, there's a lot we still don't know the Spanish menace in Cuba, how to handle an acute case of quinsy, and this schoolteacher concocting folderol about our forefathers descending from monkeys.

So one-third of Americans mistakenly think we found WMDs? Great. We can work with that. After looking at these numbers, I'm just relieved 30 percent don't think Saddam's disembodied wraith is looming in a vengeful stormfront, ready to deflower the womenfolk, lead our children into Satan's bosom, and force the men to read science books.

Vatican supports Evolutionary Theory

Tuesday, November 08, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/vatican-supports-evolutionary-theory.html>

Although there have been some rumblings within the Catholic Church with support for Creationist Science (aka it's modern euphemism "Intelligent Design"), the more scholarly aspects have thankfully come in with support for Evolutionary Theory, which is pretty much the unifying theme for modern biology.

There seems to be an appalling lack of understanding by the public and the press on what constitutes a "scientific theory" with people who should just frankly know better putting in a point of view that betrays their ignorance of basic high school science. As per Wikipedia on "Scientific Theory":

Characteristics

There is sometimes confusion between the scientific use of the word theory and its more informal use as a synonym for "speculation" or "conjecture." In science, a body of descriptions of knowledge is usually only called a theory once it has a firm empirical basis, i.e., it

1. is consistent with pre-existing theory to the extent that the pre-existing theory was experimentally verified, though it will often show pre-existing theory to be wrong in an exact sense,
2. is supported by many strands of evidence rather than a single foundation, ensuring that

- it probably is a good approximation if not totally correct,
3. has survived many critical real world tests that could have proven it false,
 4. makes predictions that might someday be used to disprove the theory,
 5. is tentative, correctable and dynamic, in allowing for changes to be made as new data is discovered, rather than asserting certainty, and
 6. is the most parsimonious explanation, sparing in proposed entities or explanations, commonly referred to as passing Occam's Razor.

This is true of such established theories as special and general relativity, quantum mechanics, plate tectonics, evolution, etc. Theories considered scientific meet at least most, but ideally all, of the above criteria. The fewer which are matched, the less scientific it is; those that meet only several or none at all, cannot be said to be scientific in any meaningful sense of the word.

Source article

<http://www.news.com.au/story/0,10117,17162341-13762,00.html>

Evolution in the bible, says Vatican

By Martin Penner

November 07, 2005

THE Vatican has issued a stout defence of Charles Darwin, voicing strong criticism of Christian fundamentalists who reject his theory of evolution and interpret the biblical account of creation literally.

Cardinal Paul Poupard, head of the Pontifical Council for Culture, said the Genesis description of how God created the universe and Darwin's theory of evolution were "perfectly compatible" if the Bible were read correctly.

His statement was a clear attack on creationist campaigners in the US, who see evolution and the Genesis account as mutually exclusive.

“The fundamentalists want to give a scientific meaning to words that had no scientific aim,” he said at a Vatican press conference. He said the real message in Genesis was that “the universe didn’t make itself and had a creator”.

This idea was part of theology, Cardinal Poupard emphasised, while the precise details of how creation and the development of the species came about belonged to a different realm – science. Cardinal Poupard said that it was important for Catholic believers to know how science saw things so as to “understand things better”.

His statements were interpreted in Italy as a rejection of the “intelligent design” view, which says the universe is so complex that some higher being must have designed every detail.

Bush and his two-faced approach to torture

Tuesday, November 08, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/bush-and-his-two-faced-approach-to.html>



The fool on the hill

Bush declared in Panama that his government “did not torture”. Yet at the same time, Vice President Dick Cheney is at the head of an effort to oppose the amendment by Senator John McCain that would ban torture and the inhumane treatment of prisoners.

The blatant disrespect that the Bush administration has for the public is simply staggering.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20051107/pl_nm/bush_torture_dc

Bush: ‘we do not torture’

By Tabassum Zakaria Mon Nov 7, 1:34 PM ET

PANAMA CITY (Reuters) – The U.S. government is aggressively taking action to protect Americans from terrorism but “we do not torture,” President Bush said on Monday, responding to criticism of reported secret CIA prisons and the handling of terrorism suspects.

Bush defended his administration’s efforts to stop the U.S. Congress from imposing rules on the handling of terrorism suspects.

The United States was sharply criticized for its handling of detainees after photographs of guards abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shocked the world.

U.S. forces have held hundreds of detainees at known facilities outside the United States since the September 11, 2001, attacks, such as Guantanamo Bay. But senior leaders of al Qaeda who have captured, such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, have been kept in secret detention facilities overseas.

Bush did not confirm or deny the existence of CIA secret prisons that The Washington Post disclosed last week, and would not address demands by the International Committee of the Red Cross to have access to the suspects reportedly held at them.

“We are finding terrorists and bringing them to justice,” Bush said at a news conference with Panamanian President Martin Torrijos. “We are gathering information about where the terrorists might be hiding. We are trying to disrupt their plots and plans,” he said.

“Anything we do to that end in this effort, any activity we conduct, is within the law,” Bush said. “We do not torture. And therefore we’re working with Congress to make sure that as we go forward, we make it possible, more possible to do our job.”

Vice President Dick Cheney has been spearheading an effort on Capitol Hill to have the CIA exempt from an amendment by Arizona Republican Sen. John McCain that would ban torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners.

The exemption would cover the secret prisons that the Post said were located in several eastern European democracies and other countries where key al Qaeda captives are being kept.

“I’m confident that when people see the facts, that they’ll recognize that we’ve got more work to do and that we must protect ourselves in a way that is lawful,” Bush said.

‘TERRIBLE MISTAKE’

Bush spoke a day after Nebraska Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel told ABC’s “This Week” that the Bush administration was making a “terrible mistake” in opposing the McCain amendment.

Hagel said that taking that stance also showed the need for Bush to widen his net of advisers as a way to regain his credibility with the American public amid sagging poll numbers over the Iraq war, soaring gasoline prices and other troubles.

The Senate voted 90-9 for the McCain amendment to prohibit the use of torture and abuse of prisoners in U.S. custody, adding it to a \$440 billion defense spending bill despite a White House veto threat.

The House of Representatives did not include the detainee rules in its version of the bill, and House and Senate negotiators are working out differences for a final bill.

The White House position is that international treaty obligations already on the books govern the treatment of suspects and that the United States is observing those rules.

“There’s an enemy that lurks and plots and plans and wants to hurt America again. And so you bet we’ll aggressively pursue them. But we will do so under the law,” Bush said.

(Additional reporting by Vicki Allen in Washington)

Another of Saddam's trial lawyer murdered

Thursday, November 10, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/another-of-saddams-trial-lawyer.html>

One month ago, a lawyer for one of Saddam's co-accused was kidnapped and murdered. This week, another two lawyers on Saddam's defence team have been shot, one killed and the other not likely to survive.

This is quite simply a travesty of justice. It seems abundantly clear that Saddam's trial cannot be safely held within Iraq. The responsibility of the new Iraqi government should be to guarantee the safety of the legal teams in the case, and if that is not possible, to hold the trial in another country.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4417948.stm

Saddam trial lawyer is shot dead

A lawyer for one of Saddam Hussein's co-defendants has been shot dead in the Iraqi capital Baghdad while another has been injured.

Gunmen are said to have opened fire on a car carrying both men, killing Adel al-Zubeidi and wounding Thamer Hamoud al-Khuzai.

The attack follows the killing of another defence lawyer last month.

Saddam Hussein and seven co-defendants are on trial over the killing of more than 140 Shia men in Iraq in 1982.

The two lawyers shot on Tuesday were defending Saddam Hussein's half-brother Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti, and former Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan, members of the defence team said.

They were caught in an ambush in the Adil neighbourhood, said fellow lawyer Khamis al-Obeidi.

On 20 October, the day after the start of the high-profile trial in Baghdad, Sadoun Nasouaf al-Janabi was kidnapped by gunmen from his office in Baghdad and later found dead.

The defence team has called for the trial to be moved abroad because of the dangers to those involved.

They also complain Saddam and other defendants can not expect a fair trial when witnesses will be too scared to testify.

'Doing their job'

After Tuesday's attack, Mr Obeidi said: "The government bears the responsibility because it is supposed to protect the citizens.

"If there were a serious investigation into the previous murder of Janabi and the perpetrators had been arrested, we would not see today's crime.

"We demand a thorough investigation and severe punishment for the criminals behind today's terrorist crime against lawyers who were only doing their job."

The defence team had already threatened not to turn up for the next stage of the trial on 28 November, unless they are given much greater security.

The trial concerns the massacre of Shia villagers from Dujail, 60km (40 miles) north of Baghdad, following an assassination attempt there against Saddam Hussein.

All the defendants pleaded not guilty. If convicted they could be executed.

Smoking and PTSD

Thursday, November 10, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/smoking-and-ptsd.html>

There has been an interesting finding in the Archives of General Psychiatry recently. Looking at a twin study of US soldiers who served in the Vietnam War, it appears that smoking doubles the risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder.

If the message isn't clear enough, **smoking is bad for your health!**

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8285&feedId=online-news_rss20

Smoking doubles risk of post-traumatic stress

- 18:31 08 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

Smokers are twice as likely to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder than non-smokers, according to a study of twin soldiers.

It is estimated that after experiencing severe trauma, about one-third of people go on to suffer PTSD, a mental illness characterised by anxiety, flashbacks and panic attacks.

Nicotine dependence has been associated with PTSD before, but the exact nature of the link has never been clear. The new study establishes smoking as a key risk factor in pre-disposing people to PTSD.

Karestan Koenen, at the Harvard School of Public Health in Cambridge, US, and colleagues, looked at the health records of 6744 pairs of male twins who had served in the US military during the Vietnam era, about half of whom were identical twins.

Sensitised pathways

Shared genetic factors explained 63% of the overlap between PTSD and nicotine dependence in the twins. “Some of the same genes that influence risk for PTSD may influence risk for nicotine dependence, and vice versa,” Koenen said.

But the researchers found that those with a pre-existing nicotine dependence who were then exposed to trauma had twice the risk of developing PTSD, compared to non-smokers who experienced trauma.

“Nicotine stimulates some of the same neurobiological pathways – the dopaminergic pathway associated with reward and fear – implicated in stress and addiction,” Koenen told *New Scientist*. “Smoking may sensitise these pathways, so a subsequent severe stressor is more likely to give someone PTSD.”

Koenen does not know “whether giving up smoking makes the increased risk go away”. Nevertheless, she suggests the military conducts smoking cessation and anti-smoking programmes and pays special attention to caring for soldiers with a history of nicotine dependence who are deployed in combat situations.

The researchers also found that people exposed to trauma, whether or not they developed PTSD, were more likely to take up smoking.

Journal reference: *Archives of General Psychiatry* (vol 62, p 1258)

Kansas – officially the dumbest place on Earth

Thursday, November 10, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/kansas-officially-dumbest-place-on.html>



The state of SHAME

The state's "Board of Education" on a 6-4 vote has passed the teaching of "Intelligent Design" in science class. They have furthermore rewritten the definition of science so that it is no longer the search for natural explanations of phenomena!

One wonders when this "board" of fundamentalist Christian dogma will support the teaching of the geocentric model of the universe or the "flat Earth" theory.

The message for anyone who considers themselves "normal" in Kansas is clear. Hire people who are actually educated into the teaching profession and the Board of Education; or simply move to an area where Bible bashers haven't whacked each other so hard that their brains are leaking out of their ears.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8289&feedId=online-news_rss20

Kansas backs intelligent design in science lessons

- 15:41 09 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

The US state of Kansas has ruled that science classes in public schools should include the teaching of intelligent design and the doubts it casts on Darwinian evolution. The move has dismayed the nation's scientific community.

The vote on science standards in schools was passed by 6 to 4 by the state's Board of Education. It is a victory for proponents of intelligent design, who helped draft the new standards. Intelligent design suggests that living creatures are too complex to have evolved without the influence of an intelligent designer.

The new standards will come into effect in 2007. The board rewrote the definition of science, so that it is no longer limited to the search for natural explanations of phenomena. Other explanations, such as intelligent design, will now be permitted in biology lessons.

Religiously inspired material

The Kansas decision was announced as voters in Pennsylvania ousted eight out of nine members of an education board that had approved a similar policy in schools in the state's Dover district. The ninth member was not up for re-election. The new board members promised to repeal the policy.

The Dover district board members were ousted just days after the close of a federal lawsuit. Parents accuse the board of introducing religiously inspired material – intelligent design – into schools, in breach of the US constitution's separation of church and state.

Since 2004, schools in Dover have been ordered to read out a prepared statement on intelligent design in biology classes. The judge is expected to give his verdict by January 2006.

Fossil records

The Kansas vote marks the third time in six years that the Kansas board has rewritten the standards on the teaching of evolution. In 1999 the board eliminated most references to evolution, prompting Harvard University palaeontologist Steven Jay Gould to comment that it was like teaching “American history without Lincoln”.

The new standards include a statement that fossil records are inconsistent with evolutionary theory. The standards do not dictate what will be taught in the state's schools – those decisions remain with 300 local school boards – but they will be used to develop student tests that measure how well schools teach science.

In anticipation of the Kansas board vote, the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Teachers Association has revoked permission for Kansas to use any of their copyrighted material in the state standards.

Critics argue that intelligent design is simply repackaged creationism that uses scientific language in order to evade a 1987 US Supreme Court decision. That decision banned the teaching of the biblical story of creation in science lessons in public schools.

A disaster unfolding in slow motion

Saturday, November 12, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/disaster-unfolding-in-slow-motion.html>

As an observer to the news on “bird flu”, i.e., the H5N1 variant, it seems that we are inexorably heading towards a health disaster. A few human cases here, a few cases there, and the virus found in birds in increasingly distant parts of the globe.

It is, however, in South East Asia that we should be most worried. Humans, poultry and pigs living in close proximity are the ingredients to developing a new highly (human to human) transmissible version of H5N1. Add to the mix the relatively poor primary health care and a bureaucracy where covering up the truth is high on the agenda, then the time bomb is well and truly ticking.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8306&feedId=online-news_rss20

Bird flu ‘out of control’ in Chinese province

- 16:28 11 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

The Chinese government says the spread of the deadly H5N1 bird flu in one of its provinces is not under control and has warned of a potential disaster there. There have been three fresh outbreaks of the avian virus in the north-eastern province of Liaoning in 24 hours, and a new suspected human infection.

And the Middle East has now seen its first definite case of H5N1 bird flu. The authorities in Kuwait have confirmed that a migratory flamingo found on a beach died of the lethal strain. They say another bird suspected of having the virus had the milder H5N2 strain.

There have been six outbreaks in the past month in China and the government has responded with mass culls of poultry. The most recent outbreaks, which killed about 1100 chickens, prompted the authorities to cull 670,000 poultry in the areas affected, and place 116 people in quarantine.

The outbreaks are being blamed on migratory birds, but the head of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization in Beijing said it was possible that they were due to village-to-village spread of the virus.

Counterfeit vaccines

A Chinese agriculture minister has warned that the country faces a “disaster” due to the use of sub-standard – and counterfeit – poultry vaccines. These can mask symptoms of the virus, making control difficult, or even introduce the virus.

Tests on four people suspected to have contracted bird flu are still being carried out, one in Liaoning and three in Hunan province. But the Chinese state news agency Xinhua reports that 121 people from the area in Liaoning who had suspicious symptoms have now been declared not to have the disease by the local health ministry.

The highly pathogenic H5N1 virus has killed at least 62 people in Asia and more than 150 million birds since 2003. In its current form, the virus has killed 50% of people known to have contracted the virus.

Drug production

To date, there are no confirmed cases of human-to-human transmission, but experts fear the virus will mutate into a form that can pass easily among people and spark a global pandemic. After a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, this week health experts unveiled a \$1 billion plan to fight bird flu, with assistance from the World Bank.

Vietnam, which has suffered 42 human fatalities – more than any other country – is currently treating two more suspected cases. It has announced that it is to begin part-production of the antiviral drug, Tamiflu, after agreeing a licence with Swiss drug company Roche. It is also planning a bird flu hospital near its border with Cambodia.

The spread of the virus is expected to increase over the northern hemisphere winter – assisted by the region's widely held practice of keeping backyard poultry, which make large-scale, thorough culls almost impossible. Indonesia, which has suffered five confirmed human fatalities, has rejected a \$10 million international loan, saying it wants grant money instead.

Bush and “revisionism”

Saturday, November 12, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/bush-and-revisionism.html>

Oh the hypocrisy! Bush has recently laid the charge that it was irresponsible to “rewrite history”! The propaganda machine is truly in full force. What he and his administration really mean of course is that it is “irresponsible” to examine his version of history, of the current moment. It is, however, very difficult not to do that when your attention span is not in the abysmal depths of G W Bush. Bush and Co. have openly changed their reasons for going to war so many times that they themselves are muddled as to exactly what their position at any given time is.

The central theme for the justification for war (as sold to the public and international allies) was that Iraq had both WMDs (including nuclear weapons or at least an active nuclear program) and the capacity to use them (i.e., imminent threat). It is extremely troubling now to discover that:

1. WMDs were never discovered in Iraq (because there never were any)
2. That the “evidence” for WMDs was extremely suspect from the beginning
3. and even worse, Bush and co. knew that (2) was true but used that to justify war anyway.

If “revisionism” is to uncover the actual truth of affairs rather than the fairy gloss militarism from the White House, then we should redouble efforts to revise.

Says Bush:

“The stakes in the global war on terror are too high and the national interest is too important for politicians to throw out false charges.”

This of course can be read two ways. I take this as that Bush thinks his policies are too important for politicians to throw out **HIS** “false charges”, his public facade for the Iraq War. What hubris.

The truth is ugly. Bush and co. decided to go to war in Iraq. They cherry picked intelligence data to create their justification and used the fear of WMDs to garner public and political support. And now that the war is going badly, he will try to lie to maintain his position. And thus is the government of what is supposedly the greatest democracy of the world.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4429000.stm>

Bush slams Iraq war ‘revisionism’

US President George W Bush has said too much is at stake in Iraq for politicians to make “false charges” about the reasons for going to war.

Amid new questions in Congress about the intelligence used to justify the invasion, he said it was “irresponsible to rewrite history”.

He told US veterans Iraq was now the central front in the “war on terror” and the US would prevail.

An opinion poll suggests less than half Americans support his foreign policy.

Flanked by veterans, Mr Bush was speaking at the Tobyhanna Army Depot, Pennsylvania, on Veterans' Day, a few weeks after the US death toll in Iraq passed the 2,000 mark.

'National interest'

Mr Bush said he was open to criticism for his policies but it was “deeply irresponsible to rewrite the history of how the war began”.

“Some Democrats and anti-war critics are now claiming we manipulated the intelligence and misled the American people about why we went to war,” he said.

“The stakes in the global war on terror are too high and the national interest is too important for politicians to throw out false charges.”

More than 100 Democrats in Congress, he argued, had viewed the same intelligence about WMD and had voted to back military action.

Democrats are pushing for an investigation into why WMD were never found in Iraq despite intelligence claims before the war.

Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada said this week Americans deserved to “get the truth about why the White House cherry-picked and leaked intelligence to sell the war in Iraq”.

“The president may think this matter can be swept under the rug or pardoned away, but Democrats know America can do better,” he added.

Warning to Syria

The time had come, Mr Bush said in his speech on Friday, for responsible Islamic leaders to denounce militants who distorted their religion.

Militants, he argued, aimed to build a “radical empire” and were enemies of Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Listing some recent US security operations against militants in Iraq, he said: “We’re on the hunt – we’re keeping pressure on the enemy.”

The best way to honour America’s dead, he continued to loud applause, was to “complete the mission”.

Mr Bush had strong words for Syria, saying it should “stop exporting violence and start importing democracy”.

He called on Damascus to “stop trying to intimidate and destabilise” Lebanon, and to co-operate fully with the UN inquiry into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

Poll blow

According to an AP-Ipsos opinion poll, 57% of Americans do not think the administration has high ethical standards and do not think Mr Bush is honest.

Only 42% approve of his handling of foreign policy and terrorism, the poll suggests.

The survey of 1,000 adults has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3%.

Mr Bush has recently suffered a series of political setbacks, from his failure to get Supreme Court nominee Harriet Miers approved to seeing vice-presidential aide Lewis “Scooter” Libby indicted over his conduct during an inquiry into the unmasking of a CIA agent.

“Ideology trumps innovation”

Sunday, November 13, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/ideology-trumps-innovation.html>



Vicente Verez-Bencomo – low cost Hib vaccine

Vicente Verez-Bencomo is a Cuban scientist whose team created a new low cost vaccine for Hib (Haemophilus influenza type B). The development and release of the original vaccine in Western nations drastically reduced the incidence of Hib related disease, specifically, meningitis and pneumonia. Unfortunately, this vaccine was too expensive for many developing nations. The Cuban vaccine will bring the mass immunisations against Hib to many poorer nations as well.

For his achievements, Verez-Bencomo was awarded a prize by the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, California and had been invited to address the Society for Glycobiology in Boston.

However, the US State Department denied him a visa as it would be “detrimental to the interests of the United States”!

As per the San Jose Mercury News:

“Verez-Bencomo won’t be here to receive the award,” it said, “because he’s from Cuba. He’s a scientist, not a terrorist, but our State Department nevertheless denies him entry. He brings ideas, not bombs, but we let ideology trump innovation.”

Source article

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10010619/>

Cuban scientist barred from receiving U.S. prize

Updated: 9:59 a.m. ET Nov. 12, 2005

HAVANA – A Cuban scientist who helped develop a low-cost synthetic vaccine that prevents meningitis and pneumonia in small children says he was offended the U.S. government denied his request to travel to the United States to receive an award.

Vicente Verez-Bencomo was to accept the award recognizing his team’s technological achievement during a Wednesday ceremony at the Tech Museum of Innovation in San Jose, Calif. He had also been invited to address a gathering of the Society for Glycobiology in Boston on Friday.

Verez-Bencomo said the State Department denied him a visa because the visit would be “detrimental to the interests of the United States.”

“That is really offensive to me,” the chemical engineer told The Associated Press as he sat on a stool inside the University of Havana’s Synthetic Antigens Laboratory, where the vaccine was developed. “It’s really a shame.”

The State Department said it has a policy prohibiting comment on individual visa cases. The switchboard rang unanswered at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana, which evidently was closed Friday for Veterans Day.

“It’s incomprehensible that a civilized nation can confuse someone who has dedicated his life to saving the lives of children with someone who goes against the interests of the United States,”

Verez-Bencomo said with a sigh. “I wasn’t going there to talk about politics, I was going to talk about science.”

Verez-Bencomo led a team that developed a vaccine for Haemophilus influenza type B, also known as Hib, a bacteria that causes meningitis and pneumonia. The diseases kill up to 700,000 children worldwide each year.

Before the development of a similar vaccine more than a decade ago, Hib was the biggest cause of meningitis among infants in the United States. That earlier vaccine has all but stamped out the disease in the western world, but mass immunizations are too expensive for many poor countries.

The synthetic vaccine created by Verez-Bencomo’s team can be produced at a relatively low cost because antigens don’t have to be grown in a bacterial culture, making it an attractive alternative for poorer nations.

So far more than 1 million doses have been administered to Cubans. Science Magazine last month said the vaccine “may someday save millions of lives.”

Officials at the San Jose Tech Museum were disappointed the government blocked Verez-Bencomo’s trip.

The museum organizes the award ceremony every year to recognize individuals or groups who use technology to improve the environment, economy, education, equality and health.

“We recognized them for cutting-edge technology and wish he could be here to accept this,” museum spokesman Tony Santos said.

“We wish that hadn’t been the government’s decision.”

An editorial in the San Jose Mercury News also expressed disappointment.

“Verez-Bencomo won’t be here to receive the award,” it said, “because he’s from Cuba. He’s a scientist, not a terrorist, but our State Department nevertheless denies him entry. He brings ideas, not bombs, but we let ideology trump innovation.”

Fake anti-malarials

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/fake-anti-malarials.html>

I wrote about the counterfeit pharmaceutical industry earlier in the year. It has recently been discovered that counterfeiters have started using a dangerous ploy in counterfeiting the artemisinin (Chinese Wormwood) based anti-malarial agents. These new drugs have been a boon to the fight against malaria as there is no resistance (yet), are cheap and effective.

However, counterfeiters have started putting minute quantities of the active component in their fake drugs to fool simple tests which can only test the presence of the drug, not the quantity. The danger is that by introducing small quantities of the artemisinin based drugs to the malaria parasite, it will foster the development of resistant strains.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4434686.stm>

Drug fakes damage malaria control

By Madeleine Morris

BBC World Service Development Reporter

Anti-malaria drugs which save hundreds of thousands of lives every year are at risk of becoming useless, because of new counterfeiting tactics.

Experts have discovered counterfeiters in South East Asia are producing dilute fake versions of the drugs – raising the risk of resistance.

The drugs are based on compounds from the Chinese plant Artemisinin.

They are the only cheap drugs to which the most deadly malaria parasite has not developed resistance.

As such, they are a vital plank in the global fight against a disease which kills over a million people every year.

The fake versions being produced by counterfeiters do not contain enough of the active ingredient to kill the malaria parasite, falciparum.

So exposure to it gives the malaria the chance to develop resistance.

Paul Newton, a malaria expert from Oxford University, based in South East Asia, said: "This would be a disaster for malaria control globally.

"We may have malaria that could not be treated in any affordable way."

Big loss

Dr François Nosten, of the Shoklo Malaria Research Unit on the Thai-Burma border, said artemisinin-based drugs were "irreplaceable".

"They are very cheap, and very, very effective and work anywhere in the world. It can mean life or death for millions of people."

A recent study found over half of all the drug Artesunate sold in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma is fake.

It is believed the drug counterfeiters have begun adding small amounts of the active ingredient to their product to try and fool simple dye tests which test the veracity of artesunate.

These tests are widely used in South East Asia but they can only determine whether the active ingredient is present in the drug, not the amount.

It is not yet known how widely distributed the fake drugs with the resistance potential are, but given the size and sophistication of the counterfeiting business in the region, scientists are very concerned it could be widespread.

Global problem

Should resistance to an artemisinin-based drug develop in South East Asia, it could spread to other parts of the world.

This would have very serious consequences for Africa, according to Dr Ambrose Talisuna, of the Ugandan Health Ministry and co-Secretary of the East Africa Network for Anti-Malarial Resistance.

“It would be a public health disaster. Malaria kills a very big proportion of people in Africa, predominantly children under five and pregnant women.

“So if we lose the most effective drugs to counterfeiters, people will die.” The World Health Organisation recommends artemisinin in combination with other drugs as the most effective response to falciparum malaria, the most deadly strain.

It estimates 130 million doses of Artemisinin Combination Therapy (ACT) will be taken in Africa alone in 2006.

Dr Facundo Fernandez, of the Georgia Institute of Technology, first discovered the new counterfeiting technique two months ago when analysing batches of fake Artesunate.

He is appalled that counterfeiters are now threatening the most effective anti-malarial drugs for profit.

He said: “This is no different from plain murder.

“A person taking medicine to be cured of this type of disease is expecting science and medicine to help him.

“Instead he’s getting nothing, and it’s usually the most poor people on the planet.”

US keeps hold of the keys to the internet

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/us-keeps-hold-of-keys-to-internet.html>

The domain name system (DNS) is what allows you to type in “google.com” to find Google rather than a string of numbers representing its underlying IP address. The top level DNS servers are under the control of the US, and by proxy by the US Government.

This has long been a point of contention for every other nation. Specifically, most nations (apart from the US) want the DNS to be controlled by an independent international body (e.g., run by a UN body). Though few will say it explicitly, the implicit fear is that the US can effectively “cut off” a whole country from the internet by deleting (or sabotaging) the applicable DNS entries. The US claims that they will never do this, of course, but the fear is still there that they can.

Source article

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10036053/>

No resolution on Net control seen at summit

U.N. Internet conference begins Wednesday in Tunisia

Reuters

Updated: 8:56 a.m. ET Nov. 14, 2005

WASHINGTON/BRUSSELS – The United States is headed for a showdown with much of the rest of the world over control of the Internet but few expect a consensus to emerge from a U.N. summit in Tunisia this week.

The very notion of “Internet governance” may seem an oxymoron to the 875 million users of the global computer network, which has proven stubbornly resistant to the efforts of those who wish to rid it of pornography, “spam” e-mail and other objectionable material.

But the United States, which gave birth to the Internet, maintains control of the system that matches easy-to-remember domain names like “reuters.com” with numerical addresses that computers can understand.

That worries countries like Brazil and Iran, which have pushed to transfer control to the United Nations or some other international body.

Even the European Union, where much of the business community backs the current system, has taken swipes at the United States. “We just say this needs to be addressed in a more cooperative way ... under public-policy principles,” said one EU official who asked not to be identified.

The issue is expected to dominate the World Summit on the Information Society, which begins Wednesday in Tunis, Tunisia.

Part diplomatic summit, part trade fair, the summit was launched two years ago with a focus on bringing the Internet and other advanced communications to less developed parts of the world.

That remains a hot topic for many of the 17,000 diplomats, human-rights activists and technologists expected to attend.

High-tech heavyweights like Intel Corp. and Alcatel will send top executives to talk up their development programs.

Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology will unveil a \$100 laptop computer that can be powered by a hand crank in areas without a reliable supply of electricity.

Internet plumbing

But progress can't come without legal reform, business groups say. Internet access in the developing world will always remain expensive as long as governments allow their telecommunications monopolies to discourage competition, said Allen Miller, a senior vice president at the Information Technology Association of America.

"For most of these countries that are complaining about it, it's their own regulation and lack of liberalization that's preventing backbone providers from coming in," he said.

Over the past two years tension between the haves and have-nots has shifted from the question of who has access to the Internet to who controls its plumbing.

Diplomats were to meet on Sunday for a final round of negotiations before the summit. They might agree to set up a forum to discuss issues like cybercrime and spam, and countries might win more direct control over their own top-level domains, such as .nl for the Netherlands and .fr for France.

But the United States has said repeatedly it does not intend to cede control of the domain-name system to a bureaucratic body that could stifle innovation. "No agreement is preferred to a bad agreement," U.S. Ambassador David Gross said at a recent public meeting.

Many experts say the Internet needs less government involvement, not more.

“When governments talk about imposing their public policies on the Internet, unfortunately they don’t typically mean, ‘Let’s protect human rights, individual rights, let’s guarantee the freedom of the Internet,’” said Milton Mueller, a professor at Syracuse University’s School of Information Studies.

“They mean, ‘Damn it, somebody using the Internet did something I don’t like and let’s find a way to stop it,’” he said.

Intelligent Design is poor theology

Tuesday, November 15, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/intelligent-design-is-poor-theology.html>

I have already previously argued why “Intelligent Design” is poor science. Neil Ormerod, Professor of Theology at the Australian Catholic University has written a very nice opinion article looking at Intelligent Design from a theological perspective.

He writes:

“...Thomas Aquinas argued centuries ago that because something necessarily happens does not mean it happens necessarily. Chance can still be involved. Aquinas argued that what God wills to happen by chance, will of necessity happen by chance.”

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/opinion/how-design-supporters-insult-gods-intelligence/2005/11/14/1131951095200.html>

How design supporters insult God’s intelligence

November 15, 2005

The idea of a supreme being who leaves creation to chance does not sit well with some Christians, writes Neil Ormerod.

INTELLIGENT design has become the latest hot topic in the increasingly blurred distinction between secular and sacred in Australian society. It has

received qualified support from the federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Brendan Nelson, and is being promoted within some Christian schools as an acceptable “scientific” alternative to Darwin’s theory of evolution. Yet intelligent design is based on a misunderstanding of God’s relationship to creation.

Much depends on what its proponents mean by the term “intelligent design”. If they mean that the universe as a whole displays a profound intelligibility through which one might argue philosophically that the existence of God is manifest, their position is very traditional.

However, if by intelligent design they mean that God is an explanation for the normal course of events which would otherwise lack scientific explanation, then this is opposed to a traditional Christian understanding of divine transcendence. In seeking to save a place for God within the creation process, the promoters of intelligent design reduce God to the level of what the early theologian Thomas Aquinas would call a “secondary cause”.

This is just a more sophisticated version of so-called “creation science”, which is poor theology and poor science. As theology, creation science failed to read the biblical story within its historical and cultural context, reading it through the eyes of modern positivism, which equates truth with the accuracy of data. The Bible could only be “true” if it were literally “true” in every detail.

This literalist fundamentalism finds few supporters in mainstream Christianity. As science it manipulates the evidence to fit this misreading of the Bible. Intelligent design seeks to go beyond the limitations of creation science. It does not reject or manipulate the scientific data, but argues that the scientific evidence for biological change reveals “intelligent design”.

Theologically and philosophically the central issue is the nature of chance. The theory of evolution threatens some Christians because it evokes chance

in the process of biological change. For Christians, God is the Lord of creation, a provident provider whose determinations are certain. What God wills, necessarily happens. To evoke chance may threaten this.

Yet Thomas Aquinas argued centuries ago that because something necessarily happens does not mean it happens necessarily. Chance can still be involved. Aquinas argued that what God wills to happen by chance, will of necessity happen by chance.

Two examples show how chance events can lead to determined outcomes. Take a radioactive atom. It is impossible to tell when this atom will decay. Yet if we put lots of atoms together, we can predict with precision how many will be left after a certain time. This is the basis of carbon dating.

Or, take the relationship between smoking and lung cancer. Despite the long denials by the tobacco companies, smoking causes lung cancer. The relationship between them is statistical: if we halve the rate of smoking we will halve the rate of related lung cancers. Yet we will never know whose lives we end up saving.

The philosophical issue is whether statistical causes are real causes or simply a cover for unknown causes. Even some religious believers want to cling to the type of scientific determinism which has dominated our culture since the initial discoveries of Newton.

Nonetheless, we human beings can use statistical causation – chance – to produce determinate outcomes. What the promoters of intelligent design argue is that God is not intelligent enough to produce determinate outcomes using statistical causation.

Do they think that God is not intelligent enough to use statistical causation? If we allow that God is more intelligent than us, then the whole basis of

intelligent design is undermined. It is an unnecessary hypothesis which should be consigned to the dustbin of scientific and theological history.

Neil Ormerod is Professor of Theology at the Australian Catholic University.

White phosphorus used as combat weapon

Saturday, November 19, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/white-phosphorus-used-as-combat-weapon.html>

White phosphorus is a highly flammable substance and ignites on contact with oxygen. If used against people, it will continue to burn until it is consumed, leaving deep and terrible burns.

Its “normal” use include illumination and as a “smoke screen”.

It was alleged by an Italian TV station that the US had used phosphorus in built-up areas and that civilians were killed, a claim that was initially denied by the US. However, this position has now been reversed and the Pentagon confirmed that white phosphorus was used “as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants”, but not against civilians.

Basically, that is an admission of guilt. No one is suggesting that the US deliberately targeted civilians. The problem was that the US was using quite terrible weapons indiscriminately against its targets in urban areas, which almost certainly means that civilians would have been affected (and can be expected as such at the time of the operation).

As per Professor Paul Rogers:

“It is not counted under the chemical weapons convention in its normal use but,

although it is a matter of legal niceties, it probably does fall into the category of chemical weapons if it is used for this kind of purpose directly against people.”

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4442156.stm

Iraq probes US phosphorus weapons

An Iraqi human rights team has gone to the city of Falluja to investigate the use of white phosphorus as a weapon by US forces, a minister has told the BBC.

Acting Human Rights Minister Narmin Uthman said her staff would examine the possible effects on civilians.

The US has now admitted using white phosphorus as a weapon in Falluja last year, after earlier denying it.

The substance can cause burning of the flesh but is not illegal and is not classified as a chemical weapon.

The BBC's Caroline Hawley in Baghdad says it will be some time before the human rights team reports back.

Italian TV station Rai alleged last week that the US had used phosphorus against built-up areas, and that civilians were killed.

The report sparked fury among Italian anti-war protesters, who demonstrated outside the US embassy in Rome.

The US initially said white phosphorus had been used only to illuminate enemy positions, but now admits it was used as a weapon.

BBC defence correspondent Paul Wood says having to retract that denial is a public relations disaster for the US.

A Pentagon spokesman, Lt Col Barry Venable, confirmed to the BBC the US had used white phosphorus “as an incendiary weapon against enemy combatants” – though not against civilians, he said.

He said earlier denials had been based on “poor information”.

Washington is not a signatory to an international treaty restricting the use of the substance against civilians.

The US-led assault in November 2004 on Falluja – a stronghold of the Sunni insurgency west of Baghdad – displaced most of the city’s 300,000 population and left many of its buildings destroyed.

‘Particularly nasty’

San Diego journalist Darrin Mortenson, who was embedded with US marines during the assault on Falluja, told the BBC’s Today radio programme he had seen white phosphorous used “as an incendiary weapon” against insurgents.

However, he “never saw anybody intentionally use any weapon against civilians”, he said.

White phosphorus is highly flammable and ignites on contact with oxygen. If the substance hits a person’s body, it will burn until deprived of oxygen.

Globalsecurity.org, a defence website, says: “Phosphorus burns on the skin are deep and painful... These weapons are particularly nasty because white phosphorus continues to burn until it disappears... it could burn right down to the bone.”

Britain's Defence Secretary John Reid said UK forces had used white phosphorus in Iraq, but not as "anything other than a smokescreen to protect our troops when in action".

The UK Ministry of Defence said its use was permitted in battle in cases where there were no civilians near the target area.

But Professor Paul Rogers, of the University of Bradford's department of peace studies, said white phosphorus could be considered a chemical weapon if deliberately aimed at people.

He told the BBC: "It is not counted under the chemical weapons convention in its normal use but, although it is a matter of legal niceties, it probably does fall into the category of chemical weapons if it is used for this kind of purpose directly against people."

Human bird flu death confirmed in China

Saturday, November 19, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/human-bird-flu-death-confirmed-in.html>

The slow path to disaster slowly rolls on. This week, the first human death from bird flu was confirmed in China. This is on the background that there may have already been other deaths and infections which have yet to be identified definitively or have not been identified.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8330&feedId=online-news_rss20

First confirmed human bird flu death in China

- 15:59 16 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service

A 24-year-old woman in China's eastern province of Anhui has died of bird flu, state media and the World Health Organization announced on Wednesday. The case is the first confirmed human death from the deadly H5N1 strain in China.

The farmer, surnamed Zhou, fell ill on 1 November and died on 10 November, said the health ministry, according to the Xinhua news agency.

A 12-year-old girl from central Hunan province who died in October also may have died from the H5N1 virus, the ministry said: "Experts from the health ministry have inferred that this patient may have been infected with H5N1. But because reliable laboratory samples are not available, this cannot be confirmed as a case of bird flu according to the WHO's definition."

The nine-year-old brother of the girl has been confirmed as having had H5N1 bird flu last month, making him China's first confirmed human case of the disease. The WHO spokesman for infectious diseases, Dick Thompson, said "it may be likely" that the 12-year-old girl died of bird flu, "but we need samples that can be confirmed in the laboratory, and the samples weren't of [sufficient] quality".

After a year with only two reported bird flu outbreaks in poultry – in far-flung Tibet and Xinjiang, China has announced nine new outbreaks since 14 October, spread across the vast country.

Since 2003, the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain has devastated birds across east Asia and caused over 60 human deaths. Health experts fear that the virus will mutate into a form that passes easily from person-to-person, sparking a pandemic.

US refuses UN access to Guantanamo Bay

Sunday, November 20, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/us-refuses-un-access-to-guantanamo-bay.html>

The US has refused the conditions required for the UN human rights fact-finding mission of the inmates held in Guantanamo Bay. The minimal conditions required for the fact finding mission would include free access to the detainees. This is especially pertinent given the allegations of abuse.

In my humble opinion, this is particularly shameful behaviour on the part of the United States government. As well stated by Mr Manfred Nowak, the UN envoy in charge of investigating torture allegations around the world,

“It is particularly disappointing that the United States Government, which has consistently declared its commitment to the principles of independence and objectivity of the fact-finding mechanisms, was not in a position to accept these terms.”

We should not forget that the United States, self-appointed guardian of democracy is running what amounts to a secret gaol, holding captives without charge, deliberately outside their territory so to deny the inmates of their legal rights (if held in the US), under the fictitious euphemism of “illegal enemy combatant” so to even deny them their rights under the Geneva Conventions.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/world/un-cancels-guantanamo-visit-after-us-refuses-free-access/2005/11/19/1132017030049.html>

UN cancels Guantanamo visit after US refuses free access

By Philippe Schwab

November 20, 2005

A team of UN human rights experts has scrapped a scheduled visit to the US detention facility at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, saying Washington is not allowing them free access to detainees.

They said going on the planned December 6 trip without being able to speak privately to inmates “would have created a disastrous precedent”.

“Since the Americans have not accepted the minimum requirements for such a visit, we must cancel,” Manfred Nowak, the UN envoy in charge of investigating torture allegations around the world, said.

“It means there will be no visit this year for the report we are preparing, but naturally we are totally prepared to go to Guantanamo in the future if the Americans assure us of their full co-operation.”

The visit had been arranged after more than three years of discussions between US and UN officials amid claims of human rights abuses at the camp.

“Under the circumstances, we will not be travelling to Guantanamo,” the five UN experts, including Mr Nowak, said in a statement earlier in Geneva.

“Doing so would undermine the principles of UN human rights fact-finding missions,” they said.

“It is particularly disappointing that the United States Government, which has consistently declared its commitment to the principles of independence and objectivity of the fact-finding mechanisms, was not in a position to accept these terms.”

The US on Tuesday refused the UN human rights monitors’ demand for an unconditional inspection of the Guantanamo camp, which they had said was standard practice for a “credible, objective and fair assessment”.

The US State Department said it was open to inspectors but slammed the way the UN experts had piled up public pressure for access.

The US provided regular access to the International Committee of the Red Cross and had consulted with governments on the cases of their nationals detained there, the State Department said.

The UN experts maintain that the ICRC’s monitoring is very different.

The ICRC as a matter of policy does not make its findings on humanitarian conditions public in order to preserve access to prisons that may otherwise be closed to it.

The US Government has been sharply criticised for conditions at Guantanamo, where 520 detainees – including David Hicks – are held. Most of those held there were captured after a US-led offensive toppled the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001.

The US has declared the detainees to be illegal enemy combatants not protected by the Geneva Conventions.

Source: The Sun-Herald

We need more religious moderates

Sunday, November 20, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/we-need-more-religious-moderates.html>

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the liberal union of Reform Judaism, and leader of the largest branch of American Judaism has given a speech recently highly critical of the “religious right”, (i.e., euphemism for “*fundamentalist*”). The key to his critique is self evident. Fundamentalists, as per Rabbi Yoffie, believe,

“...unless you attend my church, accept my God and study my sacred text you cannot be a moral person.”

How true. Unfortunately, for all religions, there is at the core an intrinsic sense of self moral righteousness. It takes very little for this to be expressed as moral superiority and exclusionism.

We need more moderate religious leaders who realise that though they can believe whatever they choose to believe, pluralism and mutual respect is needed to bring peace to a society that tolerates free religion.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20051120/ap_on_re_us/reform_jews_conservatives

Jewish Leader Blasts ‘Religious Right’

By KRISTEN HAYS, Associated Press Writer

HOUSTON – The leader of the largest branch of American Judaism blasted conservative religious activists in a speech Saturday, calling them “zealots” who claim a “monopoly on God” while promoting anti-gay policies akin to Adolf Hitler’s.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the liberal Union for Reform Judaism, said “religious right” leaders believe “unless you attend my church, accept my God and study my sacred text you cannot be a moral person.”

“What could be more bigoted than to claim that you have a monopoly on God?” he said during the movement’s national assembly in Houston, which runs through Sunday.

The audience of 5,000 responded to the speech with enthusiastic applause.

Yoffie did not mention evangelical Christians directly, using the term “religious right” instead. In a separate interview, he said the phrase encompassed conservative activists of all faiths, including within the Jewish community.

He used particularly strong language to condemn conservative attitudes toward homosexuals. He said he understood that traditionalists have concluded gay marriage violates Scripture, but he said that did not justify denying legal protections to same-sex partners and their children.

“We cannot forget that when Hitler came to power in 1933, one of the first things that he did was ban gay organizations,” Yoffie said. “Yes, we can disagree about gay marriage. But there is no excuse for hateful rhetoric that fuels the hellfires of anti-gay bigotry.”

The Union for Reform Judaism represents about 900 synagogues in North America with an estimated membership of 1.5 million people. Of the three

major streams of U.S. Judaism — Orthodox and Conservative are the others — it is the only one that sanctions gay ordination and supports civil marriage for same-gender couples.

Yoffie said liberals and conservatives share some concerns, such as the potential damage to children from violent or highly sexual TV shows and other popular media. But he said, overall, conservatives too narrowly define family values, making a “frozen embryo in a fertility clinic” more important than a child, and ignoring poverty and other social ills.

One attendee, Judy Weinman of Troy, N.Y., said she thought Yoffie was “right on target.”

“He reminded us of where we have things in common and where we’re different,” she said.

Yoffie also urged lawmakers to model themselves on presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, who famously told a Houston clergy group in 1960 that a president should not make policy based on his religion.

On other topics, Yoffie asked Reform synagogues to do more to hold onto members, who often leave after their children go to college. He also said the Reform movement, which is among the most accepting of non-Jewish spouses, should make a greater effort to invite spouses to convert.

Discovery of a new immune system in the jaw

Monday, November 21, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/discovery-of-new-immune-system-in-jaw.html>

Science and scientific discoveries progress by asking a question. In this case, the question that was asked is why we so rarely develop infections of the mandible when we loose a tooth, even though our mouths are full of bacteria. As it turns out, the answer is that the mandible has a form of immunity not previously well described!

Certain skin cells can produce chains of amino acids that act in response to infection. As it turns out, osteocytes, cells within bone can do the same. Furthermore, the osteocytes in the mandible do this particularly well. As antibiotics are increasingly less effective, finding new novel methods of fighting infection are vital.

Source article

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn8343>

Why a loose tooth needn't mean a sore jaw

- 10:00 20 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Stu Hutson

WHY is it that when we lose a tooth our jawbone doesn't become infected, even though our mouth is teeming with bacteria? It turns out that bone has a previously unknown immune system all of its own, a discovery that could help doctors perform bone grafts and treat gum disease.

Our bodies fight off most pathogens using white blood cells that patrol the bloodstream. New cells have to be created to combat each new type of invader, and this takes time. So some tissues that are under constant siege from bacteria have developed their own type of rapid immune response. Certain skin cells, for example, produce chains of amino acids that attack bacteria which have broken through the skin's upper layers. These chains act as a universal antibiotic.

Now Patrick Warnke at the University of Kiel, Germany, and his team have found that some bone cells do the same. A study of infected and healthy pieces of jawbone, as well as healthy arm and hip bones, revealed that the star-shaped cells called osteocytes, which are responsible for maintaining the strong calcium structures of bone, also churn out amino acid chains in response to infection.

Jawbones do it best of all, perhaps because they are constantly exposed to pathogens in the mouth, the team will report in the journal *Bone*. The gum line “is a permanent gate for bacteria to get in contact with the jawbone”, Warnke says.

His team is now trying to find out what triggers the release of these amino acids. Doctors might be able to exploit this to boost the body's immune defences during bone grafts or joint replacement surgery. It may also lead to a treatment for periodontitis, a common condition in older people that causes teeth to fall out when nearby bone and gum tissue wither away from infection.

Viral therapy for cancers

Monday, November 21, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/viral-therapy-for-cancers.html>

The concept is actually not that new, but “virotherapy”, using live viruses to kill cancer cells and to shrink tumours has become very interesting.

Viruses are the perfect agents of biological warfare against cells. Their mastery at manipulating cells to do their bidding puts any man made drug to shame. There are of course, limitations though. Wild viruses don't entirely play nice. They are, after all, not interested in just infecting and killing cancer cells and then disappearing when the job is done. However, now with our understanding and improving technology in the field of genetic engineering, we can in some ways hobble some viruses to do our bidding.

Some oncolytic viruses have made it to early human trials. It will be fascinating to see whether this field will revolutionise treatment of cancer in the next two decades.

Source article

<http://www.newscientist.com/channel/health/mg18825262.200.html>

The viruses that kill tumours

- 19 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Jo Whelan

MOIRA BROWN hardly slept for four nights. Her team had just injected live herpes simplex virus directly into the brain of a 21-year-old man. The virus can cause fatal swelling of the brain, but it was worth a try: the man had an aggressive form of brain cancer and had been given four months to live. That was 1997. Remarkably, he is still alive today, his tumour gone.

The treatment was not quite as mad as it seems. Brown's team, at the University of Glasgow, UK, had mutated the herpes virus so that it could replicate only in tumour cells, leaving ordinary cells alone. Promising lab results helped convince the UK's medical authorities to give Brown the go-ahead for the risky attempt. "We knew that the treatment was safe in animals, but you cannot be sure it will be safe for people too. So we were very nervous when we treated the first patient," says Brown.

Another patient who took part in the trial is also still alive, eight years on. And some of the other 10 patients survived a few months longer than expected. Given that the average survival time after glioma is diagnosed is just one year, a figure that has not changed in 30 years, the results were encouraging enough to justify more small trials. Now the company founded by Brown, Crusade Laboratories, is about to begin final-stage trials involving patients with recurrent glioma. The mutant herpes strain might be the first virus to be approved for treating cancer.

It could be the first of many. Plenty of other cancer researchers around the world think they are also on the verge of turning viruses into potent cancer treatments. "When I look at viruses I see a whole pharmacopoeia of new drugs," says Stephen Russell of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

And the second generation of cancer-killing viruses are much more than the simple mutant that Brown created. Researchers are equipping them with an arsenal of weapons that can do anything from making cancer cells commit suicide to bringing down the wrath of the immune system upon them. "I am really excited about viruses because they are such a different kind of

therapeutic,” says John Bell of the Ottawa Regional Cancer Centre in Canada. “It’s a very creative technology. There are lots of things you could do to the virus. You can use your imagination.”

The idea of using viruses to kill cancers goes back nearly a century. In 1912, an Italian gynaecology journal reported the case of a woman with advanced cervical cancer who, after being bitten by a dog, was vaccinated with a live but weakened strain of the rabies virus. To the doctors’ surprise, her tumour shrank.

After more reports of patients’ tumours regressing after viral infections or vaccinations, doctors began to take the idea seriously. From the late 1940s onwards, several trials took place in which cancer patients were injected with live viruses. A few individuals showed striking improvements, but the results were mixed overall. Doctors pinned their hopes on chemotherapy and radiotherapy instead, and by the end of 1970s the approach had largely been abandoned.

The perfect bioweapon

While viral-therapy papers gathered dust on library shelves, a revolution was under way in biology. Armed with a burgeoning understanding of how viruses infect cells and a battery of techniques for manipulating their genes, researchers realised that they no longer had to rely on the natural tendency of some viruses to home in on cancer cells.

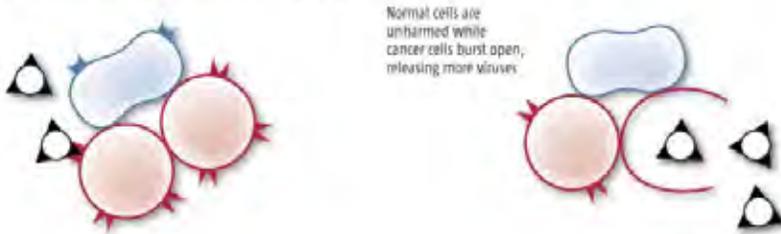
In 1991, Robert Martuza at Harvard Medical School created the first virus designed to target cancer cells. His team deleted the gene for an enzyme called thymidine kinase from the herpes virus. Without it, the virus cannot replicate. But human cells produce the enzyme when they are dividing, so the virus thrives in rapidly dividing cancer cells. Since then, researchers have created numerous tumour-targeting viruses, either by manipulating replication as Martuza did or by altering a virus’s surface proteins so the only cells it can enter are cancerous ones (see Diagram).

ATTACKING CANCERS WITH VIRUSES

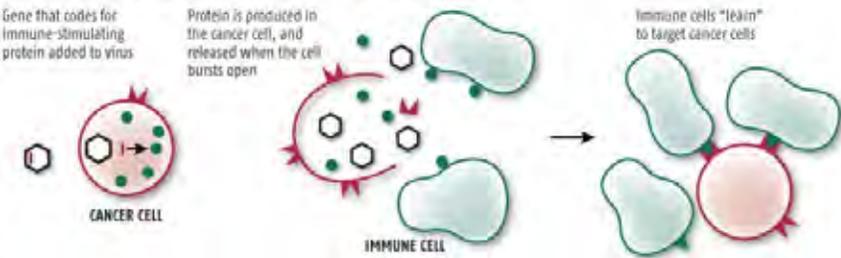
Strategy 1: the virus is mutated or engineered so it can replicate only in tumour cells



Strategy 2: the surface of the virus is altered so it binds only to cancer cells



Viruses can also be "armed" with extra genes to enhance their effect



Viruses seem to be the perfect biological weapon against cancer. The concept has a seductive elegance: the goal of any cancer therapy is to kill cancerous cells, and killing cells is what many viruses excel at. When they infect a host cell, they replicate and form thousands of new virus particles. Most then make the host cell burst open, killing it and releasing the daughter viruses to infect other cells. The bursting process is known as lysis, or oncolysis if it is happening to a cancer cell.

Oncolytic viruses relish some of the very changes that cause cancer cells to run dangerously out of control in the first place. When healthy cells are

infected by a virus, they try to commit suicide – a process known as apoptosis – before the virus can replicate. But cancer cells are resistant to apoptosis, making them ideal hosts. “Viruses prefer cells that have blocks to apoptosis,” says David Kirn, a cancer researcher and founder of Jennerex Biotherapeutics of San Francisco. “That resistance is used against the cancer cell. It is a unique mechanism of action.”

This is why many “wild” viruses cause cancers to regress. Engineer a virus to target only cancer cells, and you have a precision weapon. While chemotherapy drugs only destroy around six cancerous cells for every healthy cell they kill, oncolytic viruses can take out thousands per healthy cell.

Since Martuza’s breakthrough, oncolytic virotherapy has again become a hot topic. The results from the lab look good: many modified viruses selectively kill cancer cells in cell culture and in animals. At least 14 have already made it to early-stage human trials.

But as so often, treating people is proving more complex. Few oncolytic viruses have showed any consistent action. There are tantalising glimpses of effectiveness in some individuals, but most viruses have failed to convince. One, called ONYX-015, raised hopes when it showed promising results against cancers of the head and neck, but it failed to make an impact on pancreatic, ovarian, lung or liver tumours. The company developing ONYX-015 decided to focus on other products instead, and in January licensed it to a Chinese company, Shanghai Sunway Biotech. No oncolytic virus has yet been approved.

The good news, as Brown discovered to her relief, is that the technique appears to be safe. In 1999, 18-year-old Jesse Gelsinger died from a severe immune reaction to a non-replicating virus used for gene therapy. Live viruses could in theory be even more dangerous. “These are replicating

biologicals, and one can imagine something that we haven't anticipated could be a safety issue," says Bell.

So far, though, the only significant adverse effects seen in any of the trials are flu-like symptoms. In fact, some of the viruses might be too safe. In their concern to avoid dangerous infections, researchers may have weakened the viruses' replication abilities too much, preventing the viruses from reaching an effective concentration in a tumour. "We were erring on the side of safety to such an extent that the viruses we used were not as potent as they needed to be," says Bell.

However, the reasons for the failure of most trials run deeper. "We have got to the point of saying, 'They are safe but they don't work'," says Russell. "We know tumour destruction can occur, but it's a question of making it happen. People are now staring the big issues more directly in the face."

"The goal is to kill cancer cells, something that many viruses excel at"

The biggest of those issues is how to get around the immune system. Just as viruses have evolved to enter cells and replicate, our immune systems have evolved to stop them. And they are very good at it, as researchers in the early trials realised: "The most disappointing aspect is the fact that even when a virus is oncolytic and it punches a hole in a tumour, the immune response of the individual to the virus occurs so fast that the effects are quickly wiped out and the tumour continues to grow," said Albert Sabin, developer of the live oral polio vaccine, back in 1957.

Stealth viruses

Most of us carry an array of antibodies to common viruses, acquired either by natural exposure or by vaccination. As soon as one of these viruses enters our bloodstream, antibodies bind to it and neutralise it, while the immune system starts producing more antibodies. Even if you have never been exposed to a particular virus before, you will develop antibodies to it within

days. “And once those get up to a certain count they will start to reduce the amount of virus you can get to a tumour,” says Kirn.

So researchers are working on ways to get viruses past the antibody sentries. Some viruses are already adept at this, such as vaccinia, which is used as a vaccine against smallpox. Vaccinia can coat itself with proteins and move through the bloodstream undetected in a state called the “extracellular envelope” form. It might be possible to exploit this for virotherapy.

Another approach is to create “stealth” viruses. Len Seymour’s group at the University of Oxford has coated adenoviruses with an inert polymer that makes them invisible to the immune system. This coat also covers the viral proteins that bind to receptors on the outside of cells and allow the virus to enter. Coated viruses are thus incapable of infecting their normal target cells. Add cancer-binding proteins to the polymer coat, however, and you have a virus that infects the tumour of your choice.

Seymour and his team have succeeded in infecting a range of cell types in this way. They aim to get stealth adenoviruses into clinical trials within three years, initially as delivery agents for gene therapy. The technique holds possibilities for oncolytic therapy too, although daughter viruses will lack the polymer coat and so be visible to the immune system.

Even if an oncolytic virus manages to evade marauding antibodies and enter a tumour cell, it is still under threat. The infected cell quickly displays viral proteins on its surface, marking it out for destruction by immune cells. But many researchers see this as an advantage. As well as killing infected tumour cells, they think this response might encourage the immune system to target tumour cells directly, by exposing them to the tumour surface proteins alongside viral ones. The mere presence of the virus also causes a general ramping-up of the immune system, again encouraging it to attack cancer cells. “You really don’t want to suppress the immune system if you can avoid

it, because there is so much upside to having a robust immune response against the tumour,” says Bell.

Not everyone agrees. Russell thinks infected tumour cells are often killed before the virus has had time to replicate. This might account for the difficulty in getting viruses to spread efficiently within tumours. “It’s a question of how far the virus gets in the time allowed to it to propagate, and how much tumour remains for the immune system to have to mop up,” he says. “The immune system will only be effective if there is minimal residual disease. There isn’t much evidence that it can get rid of a big established tumour.” His team plans to use immunosuppressant drugs to temporarily knock out the immune system.

Hunting down tumours

In the end, there is unlikely to be a single universally effective strategy for evading the immune system. “This is a complicated subject and varies from one virus to another,” says Brown. And it’s not the only challenge. Oncolytic virotherapy has so far worked best when the virus is injected directly into the tumour, but most cancer deaths are caused by cancers that spread from their original site. What patients really need is a treatment that can kill tumours wherever they are in the body.

Much early work was with adenoviruses, which target the mucous membranes of the nose and throat to cause the all-too-familiar symptoms of the common cold, or herpes simplex, which targets skin and nerve cells. Some researchers are trying to adapt these viruses to spread throughout the body via the bloodstream. Earlier this year, a team at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York treated 12 patients with skin cancer that had spread to the liver by injecting a herpes strain into the liver artery. The results are encouraging; it is the first time that injecting an oncolytic virus into the bloodstream has produced an anti-tumour response.

“But the best way to approach systemic delivery is to use viruses that have evolved to spread through the bloodstream, instead of re-engineering viruses to do something they don’t naturally do,” says Kirn. Several groups around the world, including Kirn’s company Jennerex, say they have perfected systemic delivery of vaccinia in animals. Human trials should start before the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Russell’s group has high hopes for the weakened measles strain that is routinely used in vaccinations. The team has genetically engineered the virus so that the proteins it uses to bind to and enter cells can be replaced by antibodies targeting various cancer types.

For virotherapy researchers, dodging the immune system and hunting down cancers around the body is just the beginning. They have a grander vision. “For the first time in cancer treatment history, we have the opportunity to kill by multiple mechanisms in a single product,” says Kirn. By arming different viruses with different cargoes, such as a drug, a radioisotope, an antibody or a gene that codes for a cancer-fighting protein, researchers could in theory produce a limitless number of new treatment agents.

“The grand vision is to arm viruses with multiple weapons”

Part of the aim is to kill tumour cells that are not actively dividing. Oncolytic viruses are not very good at replicating inside and killing resting cells, but they can infect them and release a payload. The first “armed” oncolytic viruses are already in early trials. Most carry a gene for GM-CSF, a protein intended to stimulate the immune system to attack tumours.

Despite the progress being made, some doubt that oncolytic viruses will prove to be a magic bullet. “It is unlikely that the oncolytic viruses currently available will be able to fully eradicate tumours on their own,” says Henk van der Poel of the Netherlands Cancer Institute in Amsterdam. “Their greatest potential will be as part of a multi-modal treatment regime.”

Those in the field agree that virotherapy is not about to revolutionise cancer treatment just yet, but they are quietly optimistic about its prospects. “It’s a novel platform that’s going through some of the same issues as monoclonal antibodies did,” says Kirn. “Ten or 15 years ago, some people said monoclonal antibodies were dead, but a few individuals stuck at it and now they are a very important part of our anti-cancer armamentarium.”

From issue 2526 of New Scientist magazine, 19 November 2005, page 43

Ariel Sharon breaks away from Likud

Wednesday, November 23, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/ariel-sharon-breaks-away-from-likud.html>

In a rather stunning turn of events, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has broken away from his own political party Likud (in more ways than one as he helped form it originally) to form a new “centralist” party. Likud, a “right-wing” political party has always had a significant faction of hardliners opposed to Sharon’s disengagement plan, including former Primer Minister Netanyahu.

Israel has hit a fork in the road with the upcoming elections next year. If Ariel Sharon, who remains popular, retains power in the Israeli parliament, then it is likely that his plan for disengagement will continue to completion. Although the Palestinians will suffer from the arbitrary division of territory (which is favourable to Israel), it will nevertheless essentially form the state of Palestine.

On the other hand, if Likud, under the control of hardliners opposed to Israeli (i.e., Jewish) withdrawal of the Occupied Territories regain power, then the disengagement plan will be scraped as a certainty and the status quo will continue.

It almost seems ironic that the path to peace and respect for Palestinian sovereignty will come from a ruthless military

leader who helped form the very right-wing political party opposed to it.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4458398.stm

New Sharon party 'aims for peace'

Israeli PM Ariel Sharon has said he aims to “lay the foundations for a peace settlement” with the Palestinians via his new political party.

Mr Sharon's comments came after he left the right-wing Likud party he helped found in 1973.

He has already taken enough Likud legislators with him to claim part of his old party's government funding.

But he has failed to woo Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz, who joins at least six others hoping to succeed him.

Mr Sharon said on Monday he was forming a “new national liberal” political party.

“Likud in its current format cannot lead Israel to its national goals,” Mr Sharon said in a televised address.

He staked out claims to political ground on both the right and the left, calling for the dismantling of terrorist groups on the one hand and poverty reduction on the other.

Mr Sharon's announcement triggered a race to early elections.

He asked President Moshe Katsav to dissolve the Knesset, or parliament, but hours later parliament voted to disband itself.

The Knesset's move appears to be an attempt to wrest control of the elections timetable from the prime minister.

The date of elections remains to be decided, but it seems likely to be no later than 28 March – about eight months ahead of schedule.

Three choices

Mr Sharon's move has redrawn the political map of the country, says the BBC's Katya Adler in Jerusalem.

At the next election, voters will be presented with three main choices – the Likud party on the right, the Labour party on the left, and Mr Sharon's new movement in the centre, our correspondent says.

Centre parties tend not to do well in Israeli politics, but no sitting prime minister has ever created a new centrist party before, Israeli political analyst Gershon Gorenberg told the BBC.

Mr Sharon listed peace with the Palestinians and Israeli security as among the main goals of his party, tentatively called National Responsibility.

Mr Sharon upset many hardliners within Likud over his disengagement plan, carried out earlier this year, under which Israel unilaterally withdrew its settlers and soldiers from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank.

Unlike many of his supporters, he never had a religious or ideological attachment to the land Israel was occupying, the BBC's Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen says.

Mr Sharon's only concern is Israel's security, he adds.

On Monday night he said there was no disengagement plan for the West Bank.

“We have the big settlement blocs that will remain forever in the hands of Israel and will be territorially connected to Israel,” he said.

“There is no additional disengagement plan – there is the roadmap,” he said, referring to the US-backed peace plan.

After Sharon

Senior Likud figures have already begun to downplay the significance of Mr Sharon's shock move.

“The Israeli voters will decide what they see as the possible ruling party in Israel: Likud, that has a long tradition of running this country, or a newly-formed party with no background, and probably no future,” Likud legislator Yuli Edelstein told the BBC.

At least seven Likud members are jockeying to succeed Mr Sharon, with former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu the front-runner.

Mr Sharon remains the most popular politician in the country, polls suggest.

A poll for the Israeli daily Haaretz suggests that 37% of Israelis wanted him as prime minister, as opposed to 22% for Amir Peretz, the new Labour leader.

China allows UN torture investigation

Wednesday, November 23, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/china-allows-un-torture-investigation.html>

In a move that should embarrass and shame every Bush Administration supporter, China, the big bogeyman of human rights abuses, has agreed to an investigation by the UN special envoy on torture (Mr Nowak). It was only a few days ago that the United States had refused the minimum conditions required by the special envoy for investigation into the allegations of abuse in Guantanamo Bay.

That China still practices torture? Undoubtedly. However, they have revealed the intense hypocrisy of the United States Administration and of G W Bush in their continued condemnation of China's human rights record.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4458458.stm>

China 'more aware' of torture use

The UN special envoy on torture has said that his invitation to visit China indicates growing awareness in Beijing that the practice is still widely used.

Manfred Nowak told the BBC he had been promised the freedom to see prisoners and investigate claims of torture.

Mr Nowak will spend nearly two weeks in Beijing, Tibet and the troubled western province of Xinjiang.

Beijing outlawed torture in 1996, but human rights organisations report it is still used to extract confessions.

Mr Nowak's visit follows 10 years of repeated requests to be allowed into the country.

Speaking at the start of a two-week trip, he also said he was confident his recommendations would bring about change.

'Small steps'

He said he was "grateful" China had allowed him the freedom to visit prisons un-announced and conduct private interviews with detainees.

"I see this as an opening up of government policy," he said.

"There is a growing awareness that torture is widely practised in common criminal proceedings," he said.

He cited recent cases where people were sentenced to death for murder – while their "victims" were later found to still be alive – as proof that torture is used to extract confessions.

Mr Nowak said he would make "realistic recommendations" to Beijing and he was confident they would be implemented.

"There is much going on in China in terms of legal reforms," he said, adding that he expected progress to take place in "small steps".

Second confirmed bird flu death in China

Friday, November 25, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/second-confirmed-bird-flu-death-in.html>



Deaths from bird flu

China has officially admitted to its second death from the H5N1 avian influenza (i.e., “bird flu”). One wonders somewhat at the veracity of China’s reporting to the world, however. Basically, for China to admit two there may well be an order of magnitude greater in number of cases. Considering that the conditions where bird flu can spread to people are pretty much the same in China as in other South-East Asian countries such as Vietnam, it seems somewhat odd that China, with its huge population will have so few cases.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4464292.stm>

China has second bird flu death

China has confirmed its second human death from bird flu, a 35-year-old woman from eastern Anhui province.

The farmer died 11 days after she developed pneumonia-like symptoms after contact with sick and dead poultry, state news agency Xinhua reported.

Tests confirmed she had the deadly H5N1 form of the disease, China's Centre for Disease Control and Prevention said.

China's first human fatality also came from Anhui. A boy in central China also caught the disease but recovered.

The H5N1 virus has killed more than 60 people in South East Asia since the latest outbreak began in 2003.

The latest woman to die first developed symptoms on 11 November and died on Tuesday, Xinhua quoted China's health ministry as saying.

Her surname was Xu and she lived in Xiuning County in Anhui province, which has seen bird flu outbreaks among poultry in the past month.

The first fatality was a 24-year-old poultry worker who died on 10 November, the health ministry said.

The nine-year-old boy who recovered had developed pneumonia symptoms following an outbreak of bird flu in his village in central Hunan province.

His sister also fell ill and died. It is suspected she too had bird flu, but her body was cremated before samples could be taken, so China only counts three official human cases so far.

Outbreaks of the H5N1 strain among birds were first spotted in Vietnam and Thailand in 2003.

It spread to several other countries in the region and beyond, with reports of the disease among poultry in Russia and Kazakhstan in July – and outbreaks in Turkey and Romania.

The authorities in China have culled millions of birds, but experts are warning that the virus is entrenched in parts of the country.

Beijing has said it will vaccinate all of the country's estimated 14 billion poultry, but it is feared wild birds could spread the virus.

The disease generally still does not transmit easily to humans, but fears of a pandemic have been reinforced by its spread.

Could there already be 300 deaths?

Friday, November 25, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/could-there-already-by-300-deaths.html>

In my previous blog entry, I wrote:

“Basically, for China to admit two, there may well be an order of magnitude greater in number of cases.”

This has turned out to be somewhat prophetic. Masato Tashiro, head of virology at Tokyo's National Institute of Infectious Disease who is working in collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) on bird flu had announced in a meeting of virologists in Germany that they had be “systematically deceived”. He states that from his sources that there were 300 confirmed deaths with 3000 people in isolation for suspected disease.

Three hundred confirmed deaths are frightening... and somehow, it seems much more believable than two.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8371&feedId=online-news_rss20

Expert says bird flu has killed 300 people in China

- 18:27 24 November 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Debora MacKenzie

A respected Japanese scientist, who works with the World Health Organization, says 300 people have died of H5N1 bird flu in China, including seven cases caused by human-to-human transmission.

He says he was given the information in confidence by Chinese colleagues who have been threatened with arrest if they disclosed the extent of the problem.

The allegations, which he revealed at a meeting in Germany, contrast sharply with China's official position. It reports three confirmed cases of H5N1 in people: a boy in Hunan province who recovered, and two women who died in Anhui province, the latest of which was announced on Thursday. There may be another probable case in Hunan.

But Masato Tashiro, head of virology at Tokyo's National Institute of Infectious Disease – a WHO-collaborating centre for bird flu – told the meeting of virologists in Marburg, Germany, on 19 November that “we have been systematically deceived”. His comments were reported in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

He told the stunned meeting, called to mark the retirement of a senior German virologist, that there have been “several dozen” outbreaks in people, 300 confirmed deaths and 3000 people placed in isolation with suspected cases.

Severe restrictions

Tashiro could not be reached for comment today. The newspaper reported that he said the numbers came from sources he trusted, while he was in Hunan province for the WHO, working with Chinese investigators on the recent H5N1 outbreak there.

He said five Chinese medical personnel had been arrested for trying to report these cases, according to the paper. China enforced severe restrictions

on the investigation and reporting of suspected cases of bird flu in June 2005.

“These rumours have been investigated, and we’ve been told by the Chinese Ministry of Health that there’s no foundation to them,” Dick Thompson, a spokesman for the World Health Organization, told New Scientist.

Emergency workers

Virologists consider the relative absence of human cases of bird flu in China unusual, given its widespread infection in birds. China has reported poultry outbreaks in twenty counties all across the country since mid-October, the latest being on Thursday.

The WHO told the official Chinese news agency Xinhua last week that the virus causing the outbreak in Hunan is the same as the one in Vietnam and Thailand, where H5N1 has caused 113 confirmed human cases and 55 deaths so far.

There are other unconfirmed reports of human cases in China. Boxun News, an independent Chinese website, reported this week that 77 workers brought in to help control rampant H5N1 outbreaks in poultry in Liaoning province in November have died of the virus, listing 14 names.

Boxun reported the extent of the outbreak in wild birds at Qinghai Lake in central China in May, and alleged then that 120 people had been put in stringent hospital isolation in a nearby town, possibly with bird flu.

Bush and the Al-Jazeera plot

Saturday, November 26, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/bush-and-al-jazeera-plot.html>

Although the United States media and public are still firmly within the grasp of their government's propaganda machine, thankfully there is still decency within the British government and press.

It has been reported that George Bush had discussed bombing Al-Jazeera's satellite channel's headquarters in Qatar at a meeting with Tony Blair. These comments are supposedly contained in a note of the meeting. The British Attorney-General, Lord Goldsmith has threatened newspapers that they could be charged under the Official Secrets Act if they published any further material from the note.

Thankfully dissenting voices within the House of Commons can be heard:

“A former defence minister, Peter Kilfoyle, on Thursday tabled a Commons motion saying MPs were “appalled” by Mr Bush’s reported comments and Mr Blair’s apparent failure to restrain him by persuading him to moderate US tactics in Iraq. He said any note of the White House meeting should be published.”

During the Iraq invasion, Western reporting was by large one-sided and vetted by the US military. The use of so called “embedded” journalists was little more than giving a veneer of independence to what was otherwise pure propaganda. Although no one could argue that the news provided by Al-Jazeera was lacking in bias, it provided one of the few counter-points of reporting at an international level. Arguably, Al-Jazeera reported the facts, not to mention the “mood of the people” much more faithfully than any of the Western news outlets.

Facts, especially ugly ones about the invasion of the “coalition of the willing” were of course the anathema of any propaganda machine. Though I am shocked that Bush considered silencing the (inconvenient) press, I am not surprised. I fully concur that the note of the meeting should be published.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/world/outrage-grows-at-bush-bomb-claims/2005/11/25/1132703377862.html>

Outrage grows at Bush bomb claims

November 26, 2005

AN executive of Al-Jazeera, the Arabic news channel, is seeking an urgent meeting with the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, over reports that George Bush discussed bombing the satellite channel’s headquarters in Qatar.

Wadah Khanfar, the station's director-general, is flying to Britain this weekend after newspapers reported the US President made the comments during a meeting with Mr Blair at the White House on April 16 last year.

Mr Bush's alleged comments about bombing Al-Jazeera's building in Doha are reported to be contained in a note of the meeting. The British Attorney-General, Lord Goldsmith, warned newspapers they could be charged under the Official Secrets Act if they published further material from the note.

In the House of Commons on Thursday, a Liberal Democrat MP, David Heath, said Lord Goldsmith had threatened editors with the Official Secrets Act to prevent government embarrassment rather than protect national security.

The Attorney-General's warning was "not on the grounds of national security but on the grounds of potential embarrassment to the Prime Minister or to any presidents he happens to have conversations with", he said.

Geoff Hoon, the leader of the House of Commons, replied saying Lord Goldsmith had a "legal responsibility". He added: "It is done only in certain limited circumstances. But it is an important power that needs exercising from time to time."

A former defence minister, Peter Kilfoyle, on Thursday tabled a Commons motion saying MPs were "appalled" by Mr Bush's reported comments and Mr Blair's apparent failure to restrain him by persuading him to moderate US tactics in Iraq. He said any note of the White House meeting should be published.

Ahmed el-Sheik, Al-Jazeera's editor-in-chief, also called on the British Government to release a memo on the meeting. "Leaving things vague is

terrifying,” he said. “The British Government has to explain – was it a serious talk or was it a joke?”

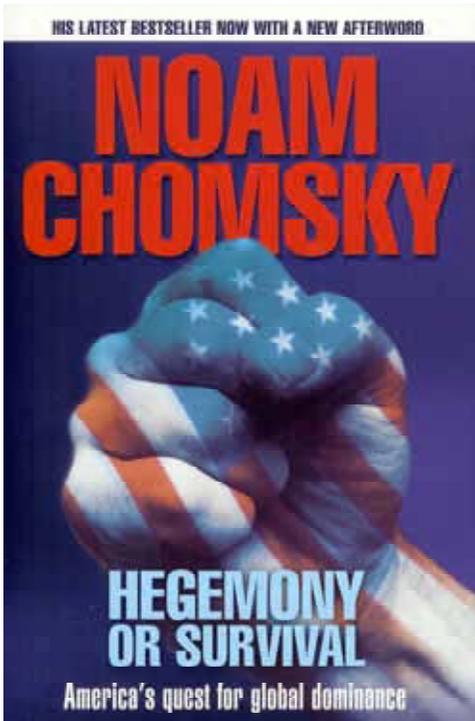
The White House meeting, in April last year, took place at a time British officials and military commanders were appalled by US tactics in Iraq, particularly the assault on Falluja. Pictures shown on Al-Jazeera of the attack infuriated US generals.

The Guardian

Chomsky: Hegemony or Survival

Sunday, November 27, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/chomsky-hegemony-or-survival.html>



If there is one book that you want to read about American foreign policy, then it is Noam Chomsky's *Hegemony or Survival: America's quest for global dominance*. What shines throughout is Chomsky's keen intellect which dissects through the wall of propaganda like a hot knife through butter. Revealed unmasked is the drive to "hegemony",

through militarism, unilateralism and more often than not, state (American) sponsored terrorism.

Reading through the list of facts and assertions will more than likely be startling for many readers, and yet simple research reveals them to be true. We should all consider why we know so little, for example, of the United States' war against Nicaragua.

Wikipedia: History of Nicaragua

“American pressure against the government escalated, including attacks on Nicaraguan ports and oil installations (September 1983-March 1984) and the laying of magnetic mines outside Nicaraguan harbours (early 1984), actions condemned as illegal (June 27, 1986 Nicaragua v. United States) by the International Court of Justice. The U.S. refused to pay restitution and claimed that the ICJ was not competent for the case. The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution in order to pressure the U.S. to pay the fine. Although only Israel and El Salvador, which also had disputes with Nicaragua, voted with the U.S., the money still has not been paid.”

Before reading “Hegemony or Survival”, I was only barely aware that there was even a war and definitely not aware that the United States had been an active participant in “state sponsored terrorism” against Nicaragua. Furthermore, I was not aware that Nicaragua had exhausted all legal means in trying to bring the United States to justice, including both through the International Court of Justice (with a favourable verdict) and then with a UN General Assembly resolution (which upheld the verdict of the ICJ). It seems obvious to me that the US believes itself to be above the rule of international law.

Say no to the proposed anti-terror laws

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/11/say-no-to-proposed-anti-terror-laws.html>

Of the Howard Government's proposed anti-terror laws, the new provisions on "sedition" are probably the most controversial of all. Even the government dominated Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee felt that the new laws were not "subject to enough checks and balances" and has recommended that the "sedition" rules be removed from the current bill and be subjected to a separate review.

The "sedition" rules are so broad in their scope that potentially, almost any severe criticism against the government, especially concerning terrorism and security issues, could be considered to be "sedition".

In my humble opinion, not only the rules on sedition but the proposed anti-terror laws should be scrapped in their entirety. The "control orders" essentially allows ASIO or some other faceless and hidden "intelligence" bogeyman to arbitrarily detain you without charge for an arbitrary period of time on suspicion only. Under a "control order", it would be an offence to inform your family or employer of your arrest. ASIO may demand that you produce certain "evidence" that they think you have and it would be up to you to prove that you don't have it. This is a reversal of the usual burden of proof, reversal of the presumption of innocence, and abolishes habeas corpus.

The new laws may well be unconstitutional and they attack at some of the very foundations of the civil rights and legal protections we expect in a democratic society like Australia. Frankly, I am much more afraid of the proposed Federal Anti-Terrorism Bill 2005 than of any terrorist attack within our shores. As said by Winston Churchill:

“The power of the executive to cast a man into prison without formulating any charge known to the law, and particularly to deny him the judgment of his peers, is in the highest degree odious, and the foundation of all totalitarian government whether Nazi or Communist.”

The Howard Government and their apologists will claim that these “tough” new laws will help “protect the freedoms” of ordinary Australians. However, if we give away our legal right of “due process”, “presumption of innocence” and “habeas corpus”, then the “anti-Western terrorists” that the Government tries to scare us with will have already won.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/breaking-news/scrap-sedition-rules-senate-committee/2005/11/28/1133026401890.html>

Scrap sedition rules, says committee

November 28, 2005 – 7:59PM

Tough new rules on sedition should be scrapped from the federal government's proposed anti-terror laws, and 51 other changes made to the package, a Senate committee has recommended.

The committee, which held just three days of public hearings into the laws, said in its report that it had heard serious concerns about the updated sedition offences.

The government-led Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee said it believed the sedition provisions should be subject to a separate review.

“The committee highlighted the need for a comprehensive review before the sedition provisions are enacted,” it said in a statement accompanying the report.

“The committee has recommended that the sedition provisions be removed from the bill in its entirety pending a full and independent review by the Australian Law Reform Commission.”

Under the government’s planned new rules on sedition, it would be illegal to promote ill-will or hostility between groups, urge violence against the government or assist “an enemy at war” with Australia.

Critics of the new sedition rules say the federal government is trying to stifle free speech and dissent under the pretext of the war on terror.

The committee’s recommendation to dump the sedition provisions was one of 52 changes it wants made to the legislation.

Included in the changes was a call for the government to cut its proposed 10-year sunset clause for the legislation to five years.

It also wants the commonwealth ombudsman to oversee the new preventative detention and control orders outlined in the legislation and the

attorney-general made to report to parliament six-monthly on the use of orders.

Suspects in detention should also be given greater access to family members and police advised on the rights of children under 18 who were detained.

Committee chairwoman and Liberal Senator Marise Payne said the government-dominated committee had made constructive suggestions to improve safeguards in the bill.

“There is no doubt that they are a very serious incursion into the way in which we currently expect to be able to live our lives in Australia,” she told parliament.

“And we are told that they are in response to very serious incursions and threats against the way in which we expect to be able to live our lives in Australia.

“In that regard the committee gave very careful consideration to the views and the very practical advice that was given to us.”

Committee deputy chairwoman, Labor Senator Trish Crossin, said the opposition backed the recommendations in the report.

She said committee members were convinced the new laws were not subject to enough checks and balances.

“Tough anti-terrorism laws need to be matched with strong safeguards,” she said.

She said sedition was a “dead letter law” and the government needed to remove the section from the bill until the Australian Law Reform Commission reviewed the need for such laws.

Australian Democrats senator Natasha Stott Despoja called on the Senate to reject the laws, saying they breached Australia's international human rights commitments by allowing children to be detained with adults and the conversations of lawyers and clients to be monitored.

Australian Greens Senator Bob Brown also called for the bill to be rejected.

"It strikes at the heart of long-held principles which are bulwarks to our democracy," he said.

© 2005 AAP

New CPR guidelines

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/11/new-cpr-guidelines.html>

The American Heart Association has released new guidelines for cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) in the event of an adult cardiac arrest. The significant changes include the recommendation of giving 30 compressions to 2 breaths (previously 15 to 2 for one operator) and only giving a single shock with the defibrillator.

Although I cannot be certain, I do feel that perhaps these changes are aimed at the layperson rather than operators skilled in performing basic and advanced life support (e.g., ambulance officers and emergency department personnel). Certainly, for someone who does not perform CPR on a regular basis, doing 15:2 compressions:breaths and 3 shocks probably results in a lot of “wasted” time, insofar that there would be seconds of delay with working out how the defibrillator works and getting a good seal with mouth-to-mouth.

However, 30 compressions to 2 breaths would probably result in very poor oxygenation of the blood if the breaths were not particularly effective. There is somewhat little point in pushing around poorly oxygenated blood. This is particularly pertinent for children where in an “arrest” setting, a primary respiratory cause is much more likely (compared to adults). Again, for the layperson resuscitator, you probably “win” more often by

making the procedure simpler so that it is actually performed more quickly. I would be interested in what the American Heart Association currently recommends for CPR in advanced life support.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20051129/ap_on_he_me/cpr_guidelines

Heart Assoc. Offers New CPR Guidelines

By JAMIE STENGLE, Associated Press Writer Mon Nov 28, 8:24 PM ET

DALLAS – “Push hard, push fast” next time you give CPR to someone having cardiac arrest, say new, simpler guidelines in a radical departure from past advice.

Putting the emphasis on chest compressions instead of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, the

American Heart Association now urges people to give 30 compressions — instead of 15 — for every two rescue breaths.

“Basically, the more times someone pushes on the chest, the better off the patient is,” said Dr. Michael Sayre, an Ohio State University emergency medicine professor who helped develop the guidelines announced Monday.

“We have made things simpler,” he said. “Push hard on the person’s chest and push fast.”

The streamlined guidelines should make it easier for people to learn CPR. Earlier rules were different for adults and for children and called on untrained rescuers to stop pushing the chest periodically to check for signs of circulation.

Now, the advice is the same for all ages — 30 compressions — and you don't have to stop to check for improvement. What's important is to keep the blood flowing.

Studies have shown that blood circulation increases with each chest compression and it must be built back up after an interruption.

“When you're doing 30 of those compressions, then you're giving more circulation throughout the body and the brain,” said Jennifer Khonsari of Texas CPR Training. She said the new advice makes sense.

Sudden cardiac arrest — when the heart suddenly stops beating — can occur after a heart attack or as a result of electrocution or near-drowning. It's most often caused by an abnormal heart rhythm. The person experiencing it collapses, is unresponsive to gentle shaking and stops normal breathing.

More than 300,000 Americans die from it each year. About 75 percent to 80 percent of all cardiac arrests outside a hospital happen at home, and effective CPR can double a victim's chance of survival.

“The most common reason many people die from cardiac arrest is no one nearby knows CPR,” Sayre said. “For the bystander that witnesses a collapse, the main danger is inaction.”

More than 9 out of 10 cardiac arrest victims die before they get to the hospital, the heart association estimates.

“The bottom line is we think more people need to learn CPR,” said Mary Fran Hazinski, a clinical nurse specialist at Vanderbilt University Medical Center who also worked on the guidelines. “We have more and more evidence that good CPR works. We're doing our best to increase the number of bystanders that learn CPR.”

Currently, about 9 million Americans a year are trained in CPR, the heart association says, but it has a goal of more than doubling that number in the next five years to 20 million.

The new guidelines call for 911 operators to be trained to provide easy-to-follow CPR instructions by phone.

The heart association also offers new guidance to professionals, calling for cooling down cardiac arrest patients to about 90 degrees Fahrenheit for 12 to 24 hours. Two significant studies have shown that practice can improve survival and brain function for those who are comatose after initial resuscitation.

There are a variety of methods — both internal and external — for cooling a person down, but the guidelines don't recommend a specific approach.

The new guidelines also advise just one shock from a defibrillator before beginning chest compressions instead of giving up to three shocks first. Studies show that the first shock works more than 85 percent of the time.

Defibrillators have been popping up in public places like airports and businesses, but the heart association says that more public places need to install the devices. Survival rates have been as high as 49 percent to 74 percent for lay rescuer programs when defibrillators are placed in casinos, airports or used by police.

The new guidelines provide an opportunity for those who have taken CPR in the past to take a refresher course, said Dr. Ahamed Idris, professor of surgery and medicine at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

"I think it's a good idea for people to take CPR lessons at least every couple of years," said Idris, also involved in creating the guidelines.

He led a study presented at the American Heart Association meeting earlier this month that showed CPR can be effectively taught in little more than 20 minutes. The study found that just five minutes of training on defibrillator use and 20 minutes of instruction in CPR was as effective as the standard four-hour course.

December 2005



© Scott Adams, Inc./Dist. by UFS, Inc.

Iraqi civil war has already begun

Friday, December 02, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/iraqi-civil-war-has-already-begun.html>



Iraq becoming the new Balkans

In the past week, a number of very disturbing reports have come out of Iraq individually in Western newspapers.

1. Former Iraqi interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi has revealed that human rights abuses in Iraq are “as bad as in Saddam Hussein’s era”. Specifically, paramilitary elements have infiltrated the (mainly Shiite controlled and US-backed) interior ministry and government who are responsible for secret gaols and torture of detainees (mostly Sunnis). Although this is denied by the Iraqi

government, there is little reason to believe these claims to be false considering that 170 prisoners were found at an interior ministry centre, many who had been brutalised and tortured.

2. Saddam Hussein loyalists have reinvented themselves as “holy warriors” rather than “secular socialists”, and in doing so, massively increased their support base. Although Bush and Co. have tried to convince us that the Iraqi invasion would help reduce the risk of terrorism (by presumably killing Islamic militants and extremists), the fact is that Saddam was a secularist. The removal of Saddam has led to the burgeoning growth of Islamic radicalism. That pro-Saddam loyalists no longer refer to themselves the “Arab Baath Socialists” but rather “Arab Baath al-Takfireen” (those who declare other Muslims infidels) should be very worrying indeed.

3. Shiite militia men have infiltrated the police and there is evidence of vast numbers of “extrajudicial killings” under the cover of law. It is so bad that the term “death squads” have been used to describe them. Possibly hundreds of people have been murdered.

What do these individual reports imply? They imply that Iraqi society has (not unexpectedly) fractured along sectarian lines, with the rallying cry of religion used for escalating violence between Shiites and Sunnis. After being repressed for decades

by Saddam and his largely Sunni supporters, the now controlling Shiite government (or at least elements within the government) are having their “payback”, in the same gruesome style of the ousted tyrant.

Iraq is becoming “balkanised” and it is unlikely that anything will change in the upcoming elections. Iraqi civil war is not only inevitably, it is already here.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/world/shiite-death-squads-make-a-mockery-of-police-force/2005/11/29/1133026469702.html>

Shiite death squads make a mockery of police force

By Solomon Moore in Baghdad

November 30, 2005

SHIITE militia members have infiltrated Iraq's police force and are carrying out sectarian killings under the cover of law, according to documents and interviews.

The abuses raise the spectre of organised retaliation to attacks by Sunni-led insurgents that have killed thousands of Shiites, who endured decades of subjugation under Saddam Hussein.

They also undermine the US effort to stabilise the country, and train and equip Iraq's security forces – the Bush Administration's key prerequisites for the eventual withdrawal of American troops.

Hundreds of bodies have been discovered in recent months in rivers, rubbish dumps, sewage treatment plants, on roadsides and in desert ravines.

Many are thought to be victims of Sunni insurgents, who are known to target Shiite civilians and Iraqi security forces, and even Sunni Arabs believed to be collaborating with US forces or the Iraqi Government.

But increasingly, the Shiite militias operating within the national police force are also suspected of committing atrocities.

The Baghdad morgue reports that dozens of bodies arrive at the same time every week, including scores of corpses with the wrists bound by police handcuffs.

The Muslim Scholars Association, a Sunni organisation, has compiled a library of grisly autopsy photos, lists of hundreds of missing and dead Sunnis and electronic recordings of testimonies by people who say they witnessed abuses by police officers affiliated with Shiite militias.

US officials have long been concerned about extrajudicial killings in Iraq, but until recently have refrained from calling violent elements within the police force “death squads” – a loaded term that conjures up the American-backed paramilitaries that killed thousands of civilians during the Latin American civil wars of the 1970s and '80s.

But US military advisers in Iraq say the term is apt, and the Interior Ministry’s inspector-general, Nori Jabir Nori, concurs that extrajudicial killings are being carried out by ministry forces.

“There are such groups operating – yes, this is correct,” he said.

More than 40 people were interviewed for this report, including US diplomats, generals in Iraq, Iraqi politicians, the Interior Ministry’s intelligence chief and inspector-general, the leader of the ministry’s special commando unit, former and current police officers, morgue officials and human rights activists.

Although no one knows exactly how many militia members have been integrated into the national force, witnesses described undocumented arrests and torture by police – including two who said they were present when detainees died.

US forces raided a secret Interior Ministry detention centre earlier this month in southern Baghdad. It was operated by police intelligence officials linked to the Badr Brigade, a Shiite militia that has long-standing ties to Iran and to Iraq's leading Shiite political party.

Inmates compiled a hand-written list of 18 detainees at the bunker who were allegedly tortured to death while in custody. The list was authenticated by a US official and given to Justice Ministry authorities for investigation.

The US military is investigating whether police officers who worked at the secret prison were trained by American interrogation experts.

An August 18 police operations report addressed to the Interior, Minister Bayan Jabr, who has ties to the Badr militia, listed the names of 14 Sunni Arab men arrested during a pre-dawn sweep in the Baghdad neighbourhood of Iskaan.

Six weeks later, their bodies were discovered near the Iranian border, badly decomposed.

All of the corpses showed signs of torture, and each still wore handcuffs and had been shot three times in the back of the head, Baghdad morgue officials said.

Los Angeles Times

Union of the Two Towers in Israel

Friday, December 02, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/union-of-two-towers-in-israel.html>

Ariel Sharon and Shimon Peres are undoubtedly two “giants” of Israeli politics. Even only one month ago, these were the respective leaders of the two main rival political parties of the Knesset (Israeli parliament). Prime Minister Sharon was the leader of the (ruling) Likud party and Peres the leader of the opposition Labour Party. As reported earlier, Ariel Sharon has broken away from Likud and formed a new centralist party, Kadima, with the aim of completing the current plan for Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. The withdrawal plan was bitterly opposed by hardliners within Likud.

In a move that proves that just about anything is possible in the political world, Shimon Peres has left the Labour Party and announced his support for his long time rival Sharon! It is unclear whether Peres will actually join Kadima but it is expected that if Sharon retains power in next year’s elections, a cabinet position will be offered to Peres.

The bold move by Sharon seems have been gaining momentum with polling suggesting that Kadima may win. If his vision of Israeli disengagement and recognition of Palestine truly does eventuate, history may well remember him as the man who brought peace to the Middle East.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4485568.stm

Peres quits Labour to back Sharon

Shimon Peres said Ariel Sharon was taking the right step towards peace
Veteran Israeli politician Shimon Peres has quit the Labour Party and announced his support for his long-time rival, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Mr Peres said he had taken the difficult decision because Mr Sharon was the person with the best chance of forging peace with the Palestinians.

Mr Peres, 82, did not say whether he would join Mr Sharon's new Kadima party ahead of Israel's election in March.

Mr Peres lost the Labour leadership in a contest earlier this month.

Trade union leader Amir Peretz has succeeded him at the helm of Labour.

Mr Peres has stood for his party's leadership on and off for the last three decades.

Mr Sharon formed his centrist party early this month after quitting the governing right-of-centre Likud he helped establish in 1973.

Even if he does not join Kadima, Mr Peres is expected to campaign for Mr Sharon and to be offered a cabinet post if the prime minister remains in power after the election, says the BBC's Matt Prodger in Jerusalem.

'Victory hopes'

"My period of service within the [Labour] party has come to an end," Mr Peres told a press conference in Tel Aviv.

The former prime minister said he would “dedicate the next years to the supreme effort to making peace between our neighbours and us, while keeping peace within us”.

“His [Sharon’s] mind is set to continue the peace process and he is open to new ideas for peace. I support his election to seek these aims.”

Several opinion polls in Israeli newspapers have suggested that Kadima, the Hebrew word for “forward”, could win the election.

On Tuesday, an ally of Mr Sharon’s in Kadima, Meir Sheetrit, said the party would try to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians in its first term in power.

Our correspondent says Mr Peres’ defection from Labour is likely to strengthen the centre ground in Israeli politics.

Mr Peres said his decision to leave Labour – the party that has been his political home for decades – had not been an easy one.

“My concern is deep and my hope is high,” he said, pointing to threats to Israeli security from Iran and from “fanatical terrorism”.

Mr Peres has supported Mr Sharon in the recent past.

As leader of the Labour Party, Mr Peres allied with Mr Sharon to help him overcome parliamentary opposition to withdrawing soldiers and settlers from the Gaza Strip earlier this year.

World first face transplant

Friday, December 02, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/world-first-face-transplant.html>

A “gravely disfigured” French woman (from a dog attack) has become the first recipient of a partial face transplant. It is stated from her team that she will not look like her donor, but she will also not look entirely like herself either.

Facial transplants have always been somewhat of an ethical quandary. In a way, it is perhaps no different to a heart or kidney transplant, except that humans place a great importance in terms of identity of self and others to the face. Potential psychological effects to one's identity much be carefully considered.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4484728.stm>

Woman has first face transplant

Surgeons in France have carried out the first face transplant, it has been reported.

The woman had lost her nose, lips and chin after being savaged by a dog.

In the controversial operation, tissues, muscles, arteries and veins were taken from a brain-dead donor and attached to the patient's lower face.

Doctors stress the woman will not look like her donor, but nor will she look like she did before the attack – instead she will have a “hybrid” face.

It has been technically possible to carry out such a transplant for some years, with teams in the US, the UK and France researching the procedure.

Skin from another person's face is better for transplants as it will be a better match than skin from another part of the patient's body, which could have a different texture or colour.

But the ethical concerns of a face transplant, and the psychological impact to the patient of looking different has held teams back.

Concerns relating to immunosuppression, psychological impact and the consequence of technical failure have so far prevented ethical approval of the procedure in the UK, though doctors here are fully able to perform transplants.

'Gravely disfigured'

The 38-year-old French patient, from the French town of Valenciennes, underwent extensive counseling before her operation.

The operation took place over the weekend in Amiens, and is believed to have lasted approximately five hours

The French magazine *Le Point* reports that the tissues, muscles, arteries and veins needed for the transplant were taken from a multi-organ donor in the northern city of Lille, who was brain-dead.

The operations were carried out by a team led by Professor Bernard Devauchelle and Professor Jean Michel Dubernard.

In a statement, the hospital said the woman had been gravely disfigured in the attack in May this year.

She has been unable to speak or eat properly since.

It added that the woman – who wishes to remain anonymous – was in “excellent general health” and said the graft looked normal

Live donors

Like any other transplant patient, the woman will have to take immunosuppressant drugs to help her body cope with the donated tissue.

Doctors working in the field say many could benefit from the procedure, including 10,000 burns victims in the UK.

Iain Hutchison, an oral-facial surgeon at Barts and the London Hospital, said: “This is the first face transplant using skin from another person.”

But there are medical, and ethical, concerns of facial transplants.

Mr Hutchison, who is chief executive of Saving Faces – the Facial Surgery Research Foundation, warned blood vessels in the donated tissue could clot, the immunosuppressants could fail – and would increase the patient’s risk of cancer.”

Mr Hutchison added there were ethical and moral issues around donating facial tissue.

“Where donors would come from is one issue that would have to be considered.

“The transplant would have to come from a beating heart donor. So, say your sister was in intensive care, you would have to agree to allow their face to be removed before the ventilator was switched off.”

Stephen Wigmore, chair of British Transplantation Society's ethics committee, said: "The extent of facial expression which will occur in the long term is unknown.

"The skin tends to promote rejection by the immune system very strongly and immunosuppression is likely to need to be kept at high levels for prolonged periods of time.

"It is not clear whether an individual could be left worse off in the event that a face transplant failed."

Mr Michael Earley, a member of the Royal College of Surgeon's facial transplantation working party, said: "If successful, this is a major breakthrough in facial reconstruction.

"It appears that this has been a partial face transplant incorporating the nose and lips; therefore issues relating to similarity in appearance between donor and recipient are unlikely to be a major problem.

"We wish the patient and the team a successful outcome and look forward to learning more about the details of the procedure which could be a major step forward for the facially disfigured."

Hypocrisy over capital punishment

Saturday, December 03, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/hypocrisy-over-capital-punishment.html>

Nguyen Truong Van, 25-year-old Melbourne man was executed by hanging in Singapore yesterday, Friday 2nd December 2005. He was guilty of trafficking approximately 400 grams of heroin. Those found guilty of trafficking more than 15 grams of heroin in Singapore receive a mandatory death penalty.

In the lead up to the execution, there has been a plethora of public outrage in Australia, from government departmental level, to the popular press, to the man on the street. Unfortunately, much of the venom and ire directed at Singapore has been singularly unproductive and indeed reveals a reactionary short-sightedness and hypocrisy in the Australian psyche.

Firstly, I do not support capital punishment. I believe that the practice is antiquated, barbaric and unnecessary. In my humble opinion, the “irreversibility” of putting someone to death is highly troubling when consideration is made to the number of incorrect sentences that become evident often years into the future.

Nevertheless, I still think that one does have to respect the laws and customs of other nations. Among the citizenry of Singapore, the mandatory death penalty for drug traffickers is

very much supported. This is not a law forced upon the population. As such, the often stated criticism of the tyrannical nature of the Singaporean government, though perhaps true, is irrelevant.

Next, it is undoubted that Nguyen committed a crime, and the seriousness of his crime should not be underestimated. I do not know Nguyen's character but he has been made to appear almost a saint by some commentators; he risked his life all to try to raise money to repay debts accrued by his twin brother. There are many people with debts but they do not resort to criminal behaviour to raise money. It was no small amount of heroin that Nguyen was trafficking. It was equivalent to **26000 doses**.

So does Nguyen "deserve" the death penalty? I do not believe so, but I do believe that Singapore has every right to exercise and process Nguyen according to their laws. Nguyen knowingly entered Singapore so he must take responsibility for his actions. He knowingly committed a crime that is widely advertised to result in the death penalty. He gambled with his life and lost. When foreign visitors come to Australia, we fully expect them to obey our laws and be judged by our legal system if they commit a crime. The principle of "universality" demands that we then must also accept that Australians should accept the laws of other countries when overseas.

And hence the hypocrisy at all levels of Australian society over capital punishment. For many people the stated rejection of capital punishment is no more than a cover that they disapprove of the sentence for this apparently young and remorseful Australian man.

Media commentators, and indeed, the federal government had nary a harsh word to say when Indonesia gave the death penalty to one of the Bali bombers. There was no charge of barbarism or cruelty. More than a few people claimed that this was fair and “just”. Similarly, as the United States carries out its one thousandth execution since the **re-introduction** of the death penalty in 1976, there is nothing but deafening silence from the Australian Government and popular press.

It seems that “mainstream” Australia only believe that the death penalty is wrong when it involves one of our own. We are quite willing to tolerate capital punishment the world around with quiet indifference. We bray for blood for those who would dare harm Australian citizens overseas.

“Stoned” driving doubles fatal crash risk

Saturday, December 03, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/stoned-driving-doubles-fatal-crash.html>

Though it should be pretty obvious, getting “stoned” on cannabis is bad for driving. A new study in France has shown that it doubles the risk of a fatal crash. If used together with alcohol, the risk of a fatal crash increases 16 times!

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8407&feedId=online-news_rss20

Cannabis doubles the risk of fatal crashes

- 11:37 02 December 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

Cannabis almost doubles the risk of fatal car crashes, according to a new study, though smoking the drug is still far less risky than drink-driving, the researchers say.

Stoned drivers were almost twice as likely to be involved in a fatal car crashes than abstemious drivers, according to a study of 10,748 fatal car crashes in France between 2001 and 2003. More than half of the drivers in the study themselves died as a result of their accidents and all the subjects were tested for drug and alcohol use after crashing.

Even after accounting for factors such as the age of the drivers and the condition of the vehicle, the researchers conclude that cannabis caused a significant number of the fatalities, with 2.5% of the crashes directly attributed to cannabis use. Alcohol was the direct cause of about 29%.

Using cannabis and alcohol together was 16 times more risky than driving with neither drug in their body.

“You are more likely to be involved in a crash, probably because of the drug’s effect on your reaction times and concentration,” says Jean-Louis Martin who carried out the research at the Univeristé Claude Bernard in Lyon, France. “But the drug also makes you more vulnerable to the effects of the crash, so you are more likely to die.” The study did not explore why cannabis smokers fair less well in a crash.

Young males

The researchers found it was younger drivers, more often male and driving older cars, mopeds or motorcycles, who were most likely to have taken cannabis. A total of 681 drivers tested positive for cannabis (7% of all the drivers in the study), while 2096 drivers illegal concentrations of alcohol in their bodies (21.4%).

While cannabis is an illegal drug in France, and specific penalties exist for those who drive while under its influence, the prevalence of cannabis in the French driving population is 2.9%, similar to that for alcohol, at 2.7%.

“These shocking results prove beyond doubt the dangers of drug-driving, and of mixing drink and drugs before getting behind the wheel,” says Mary Williams, chief executive of Brake, the UK’s national road safety charity.

“We need to see the government doing targeted, prime-time TV advertising on the issue of drug-driving, and we desperately need to see drink- and drug-driving being discussed with young people as part of a compulsory health and safety curriculum at school and during novice driver training,” she adds. “We also need to see a national roll out of roadside drugs-testing by the police to catch drug-drivers before they kill or injure innocent road users.”

Reflections of the Internet – Part I

Saturday, December 03, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/reflections-of-internet-part-i.html>

The march from “Internet 1.0” to “Internet 1.5” ***Internet 1.0***

Although the “internet” has been around for decades, its expansion out of the military and academia has really only been in the past 10 years. The “killer applications” of what I dub as “Internet 1.0” were:

- The World Wide Web
- E-mail
- Internet Relay Chat (IRC)
- and to a lesser extent, Usenet or “Newsgroups”

These three or four technologies brought the internet to the masses. The most significant for “early adopters” perhaps, was the World Wide Web. Indeed it is now almost synonymous with the term “internet” for most laypeople nowadays. I still remember my first experience with the World Wide Web on a science field trip to the Australian National University in 1995. What struck me in awe was the fact that I could put in just about any search term (through Yahoo!) and what seemed like endless amounts of information would be come out. For most people, it changes their way of thinking. A computer no longer becomes a glorified typewriter, but suddenly a communications gateway to the rest of the world.

World Wide Web search engines powered the nascent web and they are still with us today. The pioneer Yahoo! has since lost much of its glamour to the juggernaut that is Google.

Electronic mail revolutionised personal communication and in many circumstances has displaced our use of “snail” mail, facsimiles and office notes, messages and memoranda. E-mail brought in the “second wave” of internet users. Parents and grandparents who may have been intimidated by computers in general and definitely by this “new internet thing” took the dive so that they could actually communicate by e-mail to friends and their often younger enthusiastic family members.

Internet relay chat, the precursor to instant messaging, brought together groups of like minded people the world around. For many, it was the ultimate time waster and I know of several people who failed university courses from late night/all-night IRC sessions.

Internet 1.5

The move to “Internet 1.5” reflected the growing maturity and familiarity the “masses” had with technology. These changes were characterised by:

- Web-based e-mail
- Instant messaging
- E-commerce and E-banking

The period of “Internet 1.5” was also the time that many companies viewed the internet as one great big pot of gold. It was the era of the “dot com” companies. It was also the era of the philosophy of “push content”.

As people increasingly needed access to e-mail “on the move”, web based services reached their zenith. Just about anyone who was anyone had a Hotmail or Yahoo! Mail account.

Instant messaging, initially through ICQ and then through other providers was the new “killer application”, though in reality, many former IRC users simply moved onto IM as it was more refined and was without the anarchy in many popular IRC channels.

There were enough regular internet users now that on-line versions of traditional stores started to explode on the internet. Similarly, on-line versions of traditionally brick-and-mortar services arrived as well, especially with banking and finances.

The “Internet 1.5” era was an interesting time. Increasing, “web portals” (old-school Yahoo!) became less popular as internet users no longer required the hand-holding of viewing pre-approved websites. Internet search engines that were simple and unlocked the vast unrestricted depths of the web became the search engines of choice (i.e., AltaVista and Google). The experiment of the “sand-box Internet” provided by AOL was dissolved as a dismal failure.

At this time, the concept of “push content” was popular with the “dot com” industry despite its obvious lack of appeal to the average internet user. Glamorous companies and websites came into being with a “pay per view” model for media or services. With ideology divorced from public demand, most failed leading to the collapse of the “dot com” bubble.

A useful lesson can be gained by those commercial enterprises that actually did well: Google, eBay, PayPal, iTunes Music Store. By large, their services are free. To compete commercially on the internet, the strategy is **market share**. If the free content and service is good enough and invaluable enough, then the consumer may be willing to pay for additional or secondary services (e.g., eBay, PayPal, iTunes Music Store). Alternatively, they may be willing to tolerate some degree of third party advertising (e.g., Google).

Reflections of the Internet – Part II

Saturday, December 03, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/reflections-of-internet-part-ii.html>

Onward to “Internet 2.0”

The gradual paradigm shift

It is hard to delineate exactly when “Internet 2.0” started coming about, but it certainly started to have stirrings in the last two years of the 20th century. The year 1999 saw the birth of two key technologies of what I believe to be foundations to “Internet 2.0” though I doubt very much their creators necessarily saw it in those terms. These were the first version of RSS (RDF Site Summary 0.9) and launch of Blogger.com by Pyra Labs (later bought by Google in February 2003).

In my humble opinion:

The defining quality of “Internet 2.0” is the change in the participation and consumption of the internet and the shift in power towards the user.

In “Internet 1.x”, “public” content was created by the few: professional web authors, news services, or web enthusiasts. The ordinary internet user’s use of the internet was either private (i.e., e-mail, IRC, IM) or restricted to comments in on-line bulletin boards or minor comments in guest books.

Everything changes radically in “Internet 2.0”. The internet user is no longer simply a passive “consumer” but an active producer of public content as well. Furthermore, even the “consumption” of internet media is no longer dictated by the author of the content. For a long time, internet versions of newspapers have been exactly that, an electronic representation of the paper version. However, with the use of RSS technology, I can now collate syndicated news articles from dozens of different sources and only read exactly the items that interest me. With increasingly intelligent software, this process is becoming more automatic and refined. “News for me” is no longer science fiction but is in part at least, a reality.

The best of Internet 2.0

Blogger.com

Blogger was the first “blogging” service and is the one used for “vitualis' Medical Rants”. Blogger allows, as per the logo, “push button publishing”. For the casual internet user, it makes publishing a website with regular comments and updates remarkably easy. Your knowledge of HTML, web servers, FTP, etc., can truly be zero and you can still produce a half decent looking site. All that is required is content from your brain.

Other common and popular “blogging” services include LiveJournal, Movable Type and WordPress.

Recent blogs that I have taken an interest in include: “A Photon in the Darkness” (<http://photoninthedarkness.blogspot.com/>) and “Little David” (<http://littledavidobermark.blogspot.com/>).

RSS (Really Simple Syndication)

RSS is exactly what it sounds like. For content producers, it is an easy set standard through which news articles or updates can be provided in the form of syndication. For the user, it allows a simple way to subscribe to news articles from as many or as few websites as you wish. Many RSS “aggregators” can intelligently filter articles collected to your tastes.

Most blogging services tie into this technology by automatically create an RSS feed of the blog. For example, “vitalis’ Medical Rants” can be subscribed to by the following URL: <http://vitalis.blogspot.com/atom.xml>

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is the epitome of “Internet 2.0”. It is based on “wiki” technology where anyone can add, delete and edit content. The premise to Wikipedia was to create a free, on-line, user created and updated encyclopaedia. First launched in 2001, it has now more than 840,000 articles, which eclipses all others. Although it has been charged that some articles are (naturally) biased, incomplete, or factually incorrect, it is also the only encyclopaedia where you can **correct** errors as you see them! Furthermore, Wikipedia is vastly more comprehensive on

articles of contemporary events or articles more relevant to a particular locality.

If I were to recommend an encyclopaedic search in the modern day, Wikipedia would come before Encyclopaedic Britannica.

Flickr!

Flickr! allows anyone to upload and share photographs in a simple and easy manner. A simple browse through Flickr! reveals the immense pool of talent there is worldwide. Like many of the technologies that form “Internet 2.0”, it allows regular internet users to become the content providers and to also share and promote their content.

I have rarely seen a *bad* photo from the “interesting photos from the last 7 days”.

The rise of “Internet 2.0” liberates the internet. It changes its character for the better. It empowers the common man. It is an advance in the social construct of humanity.

Reflections of the Internet – Part III

Sunday, December 04, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/reflections-of-internet-part-iii.html>

“Internet 2.0+” – the future

Extension and proliferation of “Internet 2.0”

We have only just begun to see the power of the underlying technologies of “Internet 2.0”.

Although RSS was originally designed for subscription to “written word” articles, it has already been extended to audio broadcasts, popularly known as “podcasts” as well as the much smaller fields of the video analogue. Both the BBC and ABC (Australia) have had an internet “streaming” version of their “live” radio programs. For most people, they are of little value as they have all the inconveniences of traditional radio (namely that broadcasts are easily missed), not to mention that they tend to be bandwidth heavy. However, since “podcast” versions of programs have been released (based on an extension to RSS), I can easily subscribe to a number of weekly programs that I then listen to on my computer or portable “MP3 player” at my leisure.

Recommended podcasts:

The New Scientist

The Science Show (ABC Radio National)

The Health Report (ABC Radio National)

My prediction though is that in the near future the usage of RSS will expand extensively and in increasingly novel and surprising ways. Already, many RSS feeds are not “hard” coded. Rather, the contents of the RSS in XML are generated “de novo” each time it is assessed. What is the significance of this?

The “blogosphere” (world-wide collection of blogs), Flickr!, news sites, internet forums, etc., are in essence large databases, mostly mutually incompatible. Together, they contain an immense amount of data, but the data is kept in methods which are not uniform. I believe that RSS or RSS based technology will become a de facto standard method of querying these “databases”. It changes the dynamics of the internet from one that is only “human readable” (and sometimes barely that!) to one that can also be “machine readable”.

As with RSS, the character of blogs, especially on an organisational level has changed. It was not so long ago that each blog was for the most part a singular entity, analogous to an “online journal” or “online diary”. Increasingly, blogs are now forming a cohesive network. Just like the nascent World Wide Web developed a hierarchical structure with second and third order websites (i.e., websites about other sites, e.g., search engines like Google), there are increasingly blogs (or blog services) of other blogs. A good example is “Digg”. As per its “about” page:

“Digg is a technology news website that combines social bookmarking, blogging, RSS, and non-hierarchical editorial control. With digg, users submit stories for review, but rather than allow an editor to decide which stories go on the homepage, the users do.”

“Internet 2.0+” and desktop convergence

In the days of “Internet 1.0”, the internet was something you “connected” to. There was a clear demarcation between your own personal computer and the internet. Over the last ten years, this distinction has gradually become blurred.

Web-based e-mail services have moved many people away from a desktop based e-mail client to a purely browser based system. Although this was initially conceived as a convenient solution to “checking your e-mail on the run”, there is increasingly less incentive to use a primary desktop based client. “Google Mail” or “G-mail” currently allocates approximately 2.5 GB of storage, which is an order of magnitude more than most heavy users need to store their e-mail. The premise of perpetual storage and archive as well as advanced search functions is a winner for many people.

On the enterprise side, Microsoft has recently announced two upcoming products, “Windows Live” and “Office Live”, both of which are technologies that extend the desktop or programs (Microsoft Office in this case) into a web-based environment.

The brilliant “Google Desktop Search” since version 2 has included the incredibly useful “sidebar”. One highly intelligent feature is that it will automagically keep track of websites visited with RSS casts and then display updated summaries of articles from those sites. It has displayed interesting articles that I have subsequently reported on from websites that I would not have otherwise visited on many occasions.

“Internet 3.0?”

Predictions are always difficult. However, I foretell that the next main shift in the usage of the internet will be characterised by intelligent machine analysis of internet content that is “personalised” for the user. Some very early examples include the customised start page for “My Yahoo!”.

At present, most people still use the internet by navigating websites and pages that are either static or only dynamic in a limited sense. In the era of “Internet 3.0”, for example, when I go to a “news” site or page, it will display news articles pulled from across the internet, categorised and prioritised on topics that I find interesting. Depending on my responses, it will learn my tastes, my likes and dislikes. Furthermore, the collated responses from internet users allow the intelligent system to gauge and predict which news articles / topics / authors are popular /unpopular / controversial, etc.

“Internet 3.0” will also continue the trend to empower the ordinary internet user. A culture of internet participation will develop such that the current “silent minority” will not longer be so silent. I envisage that a number of high quality news websites with no “paper” equivalent will arise whose contributors writers will by large be amateur or at least freelance. Furthermore, I expect that a number of popular though controversial writers, who are known only by their internet presence, will become syndicated in the “traditional” news media.

When justice fails – the story of Khaled Masri

Monday, December 05, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/when-justice-fails-story-of-khaled.html>

The United States, through the CIA, has a program for “extraordinary rendition” for certain terror suspects. It involves kidnapping the suspect and transferring them in secret to a US military base where they are free from inconvenient encumbrances like “rule of law” and “independent review”. Let us not mince words or hide behind the respectability of euphemism. “Rendition” means taking a suspect to a secret gaol for extraction of information by means that would be intolerable or illegal within the United States, i.e., by ***torture***.

The Washington Post released a rather detailed article today that dissects a case of a “rendition gone wrong”. The man; a German citizen by the name of Khaled Masri. He was captured by the CIA on suspicion of a “similar name”. Then drugged, and transferred to a military base in Afghanistan and systematically subjected to treatment that can only be described as torture.

The telling feature of this awful tale is what the CIA did when they finally realised their error. Denial.

The secret police is real. Don't let the intelligence bogeyman point his bone at you.

Source article

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10316560/from/RSS/>

Anatomy of a CIA 'rendition' gone wrong

By Dana Priest

The Washington Post

In May 2004, the White House dispatched the U.S. ambassador in Germany to pay an unusual visit to that country's interior minister. Ambassador Daniel R. Coats carried instructions from the State Department transmitted via the CIA's Berlin station because they were too sensitive and highly classified for regular diplomatic channels, according to several people with knowledge of the conversation.

Coats informed the German minister that the CIA had wrongfully imprisoned one of its citizens, Khaled Masri, for five months, and would soon release him, the sources said. There was also a request: that the German government not disclose what it had been told even if Masri went public. The U.S. officials feared exposure of a covert action program designed to capture terrorism suspects abroad and transfer them among countries, and possible legal challenges to the CIA from Masri and others with similar allegations.

The Masri case, with new details gleaned from interviews with current and former intelligence and diplomatic officials, offers a rare study of how pressure on the CIA to apprehend al Qaeda members after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks has led in some instances to detention based on thin or speculative evidence. The case also shows how complicated it can be to correct errors in a system built and operated in secret.

The CIA, working with other intelligence agencies, has captured an estimated 3,000 people, including several key leaders of al Qaeda, in its campaign to dismantle terrorist networks. It is impossible to know, however, how many mistakes the CIA and its foreign partners have made.

Unlike the military's prison for terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba – where 180 prisoners have been freed after a review of their cases – there is no tribunal or judge to check the evidence against those picked up by the CIA. The same bureaucracy that decides to capture and transfer a suspect for interrogation– a process called “rendition” – is also responsible for policing itself for errors.

'The wrong people'

The CIA inspector general is investigating a growing number of what it calls “erroneous renditions,” according to several former and current intelligence officials.

One official said about three dozen names fall in that category; others believe it is fewer. The list includes several people whose identities were offered by al Qaeda figures during CIA interrogations, officials said. One turned out to be an innocent college professor who had given the al Qaeda member a bad grade, one official said.

“They picked up the wrong people, who had no information. In many, many cases there was only some vague association” with terrorism, one CIA officer said.

While the CIA admitted to Germany's then-Interior Minister Otto Schily that it had made a mistake, it has labored to keep the specifics of Masri's case from becoming public. As a German prosecutor works to verify or debunk Masri's claims of kidnapping and torture, the part of the German government that was informed of his ordeal has remained publicly silent. Masri's attorneys say they intend to file a lawsuit in U.S. courts this week.

Masri was held for five months largely because the head of the CIA's Counterterrorist Center's al Qaeda unit “believed he was someone else,” one former CIA official said. “She didn't really know. She just had a hunch.”

The CIA declined to comment for this article, as did Coats and a spokesman at the German Embassy in Washington. Schily did not respond to several requests for comment last week.

CIA officials stress that apprehensions and renditions are among the most sure-fire ways to take potential terrorists out of circulation quickly. In 2000, then-CIA Director George J. Tenet said that “renditions have shattered terrorist cells and networks, thwarted terrorist plans, and in some cases even prevented attacks from occurring.”

The Counterterrorist Center

After the September 2001 attacks, pressure to locate and nab potential terrorists, even in the most obscure parts of the world, bore down hard on one CIA office in particular, the Counterterrorist Center, or CTC, located until recently in the basement of one of the older buildings on the agency’s sprawling headquarters compound. With operations officers and analysts sitting side by side, the idea was to act on tips and leads with dramatic speed.

The possibility of missing another attack loomed large. “Their logic was: If one of them gets loose and someone dies, we’ll be held responsible,” said one CIA officer, who, like others interviewed for this article, would speak only anonymously because of the secretive nature of the subject.

To carry out its mission, the CTC relies on its Rendition Group, made up of case officers, paramilitaries, analysts and psychologists. Their job is to figure out how to snatch someone off a city street, or a remote hillside, or a secluded corner of an airport where local authorities wait.

Members of the Rendition Group follow a simple but standard procedure: Dressed head to toe in black, including masks, they blindfold and cut the clothes off their new captives, then administer an enema and sleeping drugs.

They outfit detainees in a diaper and jumpsuit for what can be a day-long trip. Their destinations: either a detention facility operated by cooperative countries in the Middle East and Central Asia, including Afghanistan, or one of the CIA's own covert prisons – referred to in classified documents as “black sites,” which at various times have been operated in eight countries, including several in Eastern Europe.

In the months after the Sept. 11 attacks, the CTC was the place to be for CIA officers wanting in on the fight. The staff ballooned from 300 to 1,200 nearly overnight.

“It was the Camelot of counterterrorism,” a former counterterrorism official said. “We didn't have to mess with others – and it was fun.”

Thousands of tips and allegations about potential threats poured in after the attacks. Stung by the failure to detect the plot, CIA officers passed along every tidbit. The process of vetting and evaluating information suffered greatly, former and current intelligence officials said. “Whatever quality control mechanisms were in play on September 10th were eliminated on September 11th,” a former senior intelligence official said.

The decision makers

J. Cofer Black, a professorial former spy who spent years chasing Osama bin Laden, was the CTC's director. With a flair for melodrama, Black had earned special access to the White House after he briefed President Bush on the CIA's war plan for Afghanistan.

Colleagues recall that he would return from the White House inspired and talking in missionary terms. Black, now in the private security business, declined to comment.

Some colleagues said his fervor was in line with the responsibility Bush bestowed on the CIA when he signed a top secret presidential finding six

days after the 9/11 attacks. It authorized an unprecedented range of covert action, including lethal measures and renditions, disinformation campaigns and cyber attacks against the al Qaeda enemy, according to current and former intelligence officials. Black's attitude was exactly what some CIA officers believed was needed to get the job done.

Others criticized Black's CTC for embracing a "Hollywood model" of operations, as one former longtime CIA veteran called it, eschewing the hard work of recruiting agents and penetrating terrorist networks. Instead, the new approach was similar to the flashier paramilitary operations that had worked so well in Afghanistan, and played well at the White House, where the president was keeping a scorecard of captured or killed terrorists.

The person most often in the middle of arguments over whether to dispatch a rendition team was a former Soviet analyst with spiked hair that matched her in-your-face personality who heads the CTC's al Qaeda unit, according to a half-dozen CIA veterans who know her. Her name is being withheld because she is under cover.

She earned a reputation for being aggressive and confident, just the right quality, some colleagues thought, for a commander in the CIA's global war on terrorism. Others criticized her for being overzealous and too quick to order paramilitary action.

The CIA and Guantanamo Bay

One way the CIA has dealt with detainees it no longer wants to hold is to transfer them to the custody of the U.S. military at Guantanamo Bay, where defense authorities decide whether to keep or release them after a review.

About a dozen men have been transferred by the CIA to Guantanamo Bay, according to a Washington Post review of military tribunal testimony and other records. Some CIA officials have argued that the facility has become, as one former senior official put it, "a dumping ground" for CIA mistakes.

But several former intelligence officials dispute that and defend the transfer of CIA detainees to military custody. They acknowledged that some of those sent to Guantanamo Bay are prisoners who, after interrogation and review, turned out to have less valuable information than originally suspected. Still, they said, such prisoners are dangerous and would attack if given the chance.

Among those released from Guantanamo is Mamdouh Habib, an Egyptian-born Australian citizen, apprehended by a CIA team in Pakistan in October 2001, then sent to Egypt for interrogation, according to court papers. He has alleged that he was burned by cigarettes, given electric shocks and beaten by Egyptian captors. After six months, he was flown to Guantanamo Bay and let go earlier this year without being charged.

Another CIA former captive, according to declassified testimony from military tribunals and other records, is Mohamedou Oulad Slahi, a Mauritanian and former Canada resident, who says he turned himself in to the Mauritanian police 18 days after the 9/11 attacks because he heard the Americans were looking for him. The CIA took him to Jordan, where he spent eight months undergoing interrogation, according to his testimony, before being taken to Guantanamo Bay.

Another is Muhammad Saad Iqbal Madni, an Egyptian imprisoned by Indonesia authorities in January 2002 after he was heard talking – he says jokingly – about a new shoe bomb technology. He was flown to Egypt for interrogation and returned to CIA hands four months later, according to one former intelligence official. After being held for 13 months in Afghanistan, he was taken to Guantanamo Bay, according to his testimony.

Masri's capture and rendition

Khaled Masri came to the attention of Macedonian authorities on New Year's Eve 2003. Masri, an unemployed father of five living in Ulm,

Germany, said he had gone by bus to Macedonia to blow off steam after a spat with his wife. He was taken off a bus at the Tabanovce border crossing by police because his name was similar to that of an associate of a 9/11 hijacker. The police drove him to Skopje, the capital, and put him in a motel room with darkened windows, he said in a recent telephone interview from Germany.

The police treated Masri firmly but cordially, asking about his passport, which they insisted was forged, about al Qaeda and about his hometown mosque, he said. When he pressed them to let him go, they displayed their pistols.

Unbeknown to Masri, the Macedonians had contacted the CIA station in Skopje. The station chief was on holiday. But the deputy chief, a junior officer, was excited about the catch and about being able to contribute to the counterterrorism fight, current and former intelligence officials familiar with the case said.

“The Skopje station really wanted a scalp because everyone wanted a part of the game,” a CIA officer said. Because the European Division chief at headquarters was also on vacation, the deputy dealt directly with the CTC and the head of its al Qaeda unit.

In the first weeks of 2004, an argument arose over whether the CIA should take Masri from local authorities and remove him from the country for interrogation, a classic rendition operation.

The director of the al Qaeda unit supported that approach. She insisted he was probably a terrorist, and should be imprisoned and interrogated immediately.

Others were doubtful. They wanted to wait to see whether the passport was proved fraudulent. Beyond that, there was no evidence Masri was not who

he claimed to be – a German citizen of Arab descent traveling after a disagreement with his wife.

The unit's director won the argument. She ordered Masri captured and flown to a CIA prison in Afghanistan.

On the 23rd day of his motel captivity, the police videotaped Masri, then bundled him, handcuffed and blindfolded, into a van and drove to a closed-off building at the airport, Masri said. There, in silence, someone cut off his clothes. As they changed his blindfold, "I saw seven or eight men with black clothing and wearing masks," he later said in an interview. He said he was drugged to sleep for a long plane ride.

The wrong man

Masri said his cell in Afghanistan was cold, dirty and in a cellar, with no light and one dirty cover for warmth. The first night he said he was kicked and beaten and warned by an interrogator: "You are here in a country where no one knows about you, in a country where there is no law. If you die, we will bury you, and no one will know."

Masri was guarded during the day by Afghans, he said. At night, men who sounded as if they spoke American-accented English showed up for the interrogation. Sometimes a man he believed was a doctor in a mask came to take photos, draw blood and collect a urine sample.

Back at the CTC, Masri's passport was given to the Office of Technical Services to analyze. By March, OTS had concluded the passport was genuine. The CIA had imprisoned the wrong man.

At the CIA, the question was: Now what? Some officials wanted to go directly to the German government; others did not. Someone suggested a reverse rendition: Return Masri to Macedonia and release him. "There wouldn't be a trace. No airplane tickets. Nothing. No one would believe

him,” one former official said. “There would be a bump in the press, but then it would be over.”

Once the mistake reached Tenet, he laid out the options to his counterparts, including the idea of not telling the Germans. Condoleezza Rice, then Bush’s national security adviser, and Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage argued they had to be told, a position Tenet took, according to one former intelligence official.

“You couldn’t have the president lying to the German chancellor” should the issue come up, a government official involved in the matter said.

Senior State Department officials decided to approach Interior Minister Schily, who had been a steadfast Bush supporter even when differences over the Iraq war strained ties between the two countries. Ambassador Coats had excellent rapport with Schily.

The CIA argued for minimal disclosure of information. The State Department insisted on a truthful, complete statement. The two agencies quibbled over whether it should include an apology, according to officials.

Masri’s release

Meanwhile, Masri was growing desperate. There were rumors that a prisoner had died under torture. Masri could not answer most questions put to him. He said he steadied himself by talking with other prisoners and reading the Koran.

A week before his release in late May 2004, Masri said he was visited in prison by a German man with a goatee who called himself Sam. Masri said he asked him if he were from the German government and whether the government knew he was there. Sam said he could not answer either question.

“Does my wife at least know I’m here?” Masri asked.

“No, she does not,” Sam replied, according to Masri.

Sam told Masri he was going to be released soon but that he would not receive any documents or papers confirming his ordeal. The Americans would never admit they had taken him prisoner, Sam added, according to Masri.

On the day of his release, the prison’s director, who Masri believed was an American, told Masri that he had been held because he “had a suspicious name,” Masri said in an interview.

Several intelligence and diplomatic officials said Macedonia did not want the CIA to bring Masri back inside the country, so the agency arranged for him to be flown to Albania. Masri said he was taken to a narrow country road at dusk. When they let him off, “They asked me not to look back when I started walking,” Masri said. “I was afraid they would shoot me in the back.”

He said he was quickly met by three armed men. They drove all night, arriving in the morning at Mother Teresa Airport in Tirana. Masri said he was escorted onto the plane, past all the security checkpoints, by an Albanian.

Masri has been reunited with his children and wife, who had moved the family to Lebanon because she did not know where her husband was. Unemployed and lonely, Masri says neither his German nor Arab friends dare associate with him because of the publicity.

Meanwhile, a German prosecutor continues to work Masri’s case. A Macedonia bus driver has confirmed that Masri was taken away by border guards on the date he gave investigators. A forensic analysis of Masri’s hair showed he was malnourished during the period he says he was in the prison.

Flight logs show a plane registered to a CIA front company flew out of Macedonia on the day Masri says he went to Afghanistan.

Masri can find few words to explain his ordeal. “I have very bad feelings” about the United States, he said. “I think it’s just like in the Arab countries: arresting people, treating them inhumanly and less than that, and with no rights and no laws.”

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this article.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company

Artemisinin resistance reported

Monday, December 05, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/artemisinin-resistance-reported.html>

These new drugs based on an extract from Chinese Wormwood were the best weapon against malaria. They are effective, have little resistance and cheap. Unfortunately, it seems that artemisinin resistance has been detected in Senegal and French Guiana where the drugs were not used with proper controls. The WHO has always advised that artemisinin be combined with older anti-malarial drugs to help prevent the development of resistant strains.

As mentioned in a previous article, the sale of counterfeit anti-malarial drugs (with trace amounts of artemisinin compounds to fool simple tests) will also put a selective pressure on the malaria parasite to develop resistance. Despite warnings and good intentions, the spread of artemisinin resistance malaria may be inevitable. Those greedy or foolish few will ruin this lifesaving drug.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/world/alarm-at-malaria-drugs-lost-potency/2005/12/02/1133422108740.html>

Alarm at malaria drug's lost potency

By Sarah Boseley in London

December 3, 2005

A NEW class of malaria drugs billed as a life-saver for millions of children in Africa and Asia is already losing its potency, scientists warned in a paper that also suggests the drugs may be being used without proper regulation or controls in some countries.

Experts described the study, showing resistance developing to artemisinin drugs, universally recommended for malaria treatment by the World Health Organisation, as “a wake-up call”.

The content of the paper, which was published yesterday in the medical journal *The Lancet*, will dismay those who have been working to cut the death toll from malaria of more than 1 million people a year, 70 per cent of those being children under the age of five and babies.

Resistance to malaria drugs has always been a problem but had become so serious that some of the older drugs, such as chloroquine and, in east Africa, the combination of sulfadoxine-pyrimethamin, had become virtually useless.

Artemisinin compounds have been widely seen as the answer. They are supposed to be used in combination with other drugs to reduce the chances of the malaria parasite, *Plasmodium falciparum*, developing resistance to them. A combination of artesunate (an artemisinin derivative) and the older drug mefloquine has been used in Thailand for 10 years without resistance developing.

But scientists from the Pasteur Institute network report in *The Lancet* that they found resistance to artemisinin in blood samples from patients in Senegal and French Guiana, where, they said, the drugs were not being used with proper controls. The scientists also tested blood from patients in Cambodia, where the drugs are controlled, and did not find resistance in those samples.

Stress causes impaired healing

Tuesday, December 06, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/stress-causes-impaired-healing.html>

American researchers at the Ohio State University College of Medicine have performed a rather beautiful experimental study looking at the effect of emotional stress (in the form of marital conflict) on wound healing.

The “wounds” were “standardised” by creating them using a punch biopsy device.

Apparently, wounds in the “stressed” couples healed at only 60% of the rate of the “low stress” couples and took on average an extra day to heal. This was only after a 30 minute argument!

As mentioned in the article, if such a relatively simple psychological stressor could have such a clear effect on healing, we perhaps should reconsider how we approach people with conditions like chronic ulcers. A more holistic approach with treatment (or at least consideration) of social stressors may significantly improve results.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8418&feedId=online-news_rss20

Arguments dramatically slow wound healing

- 21:00 05 December 2005

- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

The stress a married couple experiences during a 30-minute argument can delay their bodies' ability to heal a wound by at least a day, according to a new study.

And if the couples' relationship endures routine hostility, the delay can be even longer. There could be important implications for people suffering from chronic wounds, such as skin ulcers.

"We knew that chronic stress causes reduced immunity, but to find that an argument of just half an hour has such a profound effect on wound healing is quite shocking," says Patricia Price at the Wound Healing Research Unit at Cardiff University, Wales, who was not involved in the study.

Researchers at Ohio State University College of Medicine in the US inflicted small wounds on 42 otherwise healthy married couples, whose ages ranged from 22 to 77.

Open sores

Each partner was wounded on the forearm with a punch biopsy device, which scrapes off eight patches of the skin's surface, each 8 millimetres in diameter, to leave small open sores. Before a blister could form, another device was used to create a protective bubble over each wound from which the researchers could extract the fluids that normally fill such blisters.

In the first experiment, each of the partners in turn was asked to talk about an aspect of themselves that they wanted to change, while the other was instructed to contribute with encouraging comments. The discussions were designed to be conflict-free.

In a second session, a couple of months later, each partner was asked to raise a contentious issue within their relationship, such as money or in-laws. Their stress was measured using blood tests and questionnaires.

Most of the couples' wounds had healed within five days of the first session. But the 30-minute arguments in the second session caused a day's delay in healing.

Argumentative couples

Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, who led the research with her husband, also found that couples who had higher levels of hostility towards each other took an average of six days to heal after the first session, and seven days after the second. "Wounds on the hostile couples healed at only 60% of the rate of couples considered to have low hostility," she said. Hostility was measured using video analysis and questionnaires.

The fluid samples showed differences too. Those in hostile relationships had marked differences in levels of a key immune chemical called interleukin-6 (IL-6), a cytokine that helps balance the immune response. Increased levels stimulate the healing process, but too much appears to overwhelm it.

High-hostility couples had an overly sensitised IL-6 response, the researchers found. Their normal IL-6 levels were generally too low, but following conflict they produced an exaggerated response.

Price comments: "This study was carried out on healthy people – a lot of them young. So imagine the effect on people who are elderly or already immunosuppressed. Some wounds, such as leg ulceration associated with diabetic foot disease, can take months to heal and the implications of stress for these people could be enormous," she told New Scientist, adding that a psychological component may be required for the treatment of wounds.

Kiecolt-Glaser points out that marital fights that occur in private will be more extreme than those studied in the lab, so the consequences for wound healing could be even greater.

Journal reference: Archives of General Psychiatry (vol 62, p 1377)

New animal discovered in Borneo

Wednesday, December 07, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/new-animal-discovered-in-borneo.html>

The WWF has caught two photos with a camera trap of what appears to be a completely unknown mammal. In the modern day, discovery of a new mammal is very rare. The creature is larger “than a domestic cat, dark red and has a long muscular tail”. Apparently, it is not known to the local people.



The Borneo “cat”

Dr Isaac from the Institute of Zoology in London believes that it may be an animal similar to a civet.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/4501152.stm>

'New mammal' seen in Borneo woods

By Richard Black

Environment Correspondent, BBC News website

In the dense central forests of Borneo, a conservation group has found what appears to be a new species of mammal.

WWF caught two images of the animal, which is bigger than a domestic cat, dark red, and has a long muscular tail.

Local people, the WWF says, had not seen the species before, and researchers say it looks to be new.

The WWF says there is an urgent need to conserve forests in south-east Asia which are under pressure from logging and the palm oil trade.

The creature, believed to be carnivorous, was spotted in the Kayan Mentarang National Park, which lies in Indonesian territory on Borneo.

The team which discovered it, led by biologist Stephan Wulffraat, is publishing full details in a new book on Borneo and its wildlife.

“You don't find new mammals that often, and to do so must be extraordinary,” said Callum Rankine, head of the species programme at WWF-UK.

“We've got camera traps there, which are passive devices relying on infra-red beams across forest paths,” he told the BBC News website.

“Lots of animals come past – it's much easier than pushing through the forest itself – and when an animal cuts the beam, two cameras catch images from the front and back.”

Not a lemur

So far, two images are all that exist. But they were enough to convince Nick Isaac from the Institute of Zoology in London that the animal may indeed be new.

“The photos look most like a lemur,” he told the BBC News website. “But there certainly shouldn't be lemurs in Borneo.”

These long-tailed primates are confined to the island of Madagascar.

“It's more likely to be a viverrid – that's the family which includes the mongoose and civets – which is a very poorly known group,” Dr Isaac said.

“One of the photos clearly shows the length of the tail and how muscly it is; civets use their tails to balance in trees, so this new animal may spend chunks of its time up trees too.”

That could be one reason why it has not been spotted before. Another could be that access to the heart of Borneo is becoming easier as population centres expand and roads are built.

The WWF says this is the heart of the issue. It accuses the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia, which each own parts of Borneo, of encouraging the loss of native jungle by allowing the development of giant palm oil plantations.

Last week Pehin Sri Haji Abdul Taib Mahmud, chief minister of Sarawak, the larger Malaysian state on Borneo, said that such claims are unfounded and part of a smear campaign.

He told the BBC News website that palm oil plantations are mainly sited on land which had previously been cleared for cultivation or are in “secondary jungle”.

But the WWF says species like the new viverrid – if new viverrid it be – are threatened by such development.

It is concerned that other as yet unknown creatures may go extinct before their existence can be documented.

The group is planning to capture the new species in a live trap so it can be properly studied and described.

Big balls, little brain...

Wednesday, December 07, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/big-balls-little-brain.html>

In a study that is of perhaps questionable importance to man's understanding of the universe, Dr Scott Pitnick from Syracuse University in New York has discovered an inverse relationship between testicular size and brain size in bats.

Without a doubt, this study will supply the "proof" that many women have always known to be true.

Source article

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/unusual-tales/i-think-therefore-i-am-/2005/12/07/1133829642605.html>

I think, therefore I am ...

December 7, 2005 – 2:27PM

A new study has found that big testicles go together with tiny brains.

The discovery, which many women may not find surprising, suggests a biological trade-off has to be made between brains and sperm.

It seems that because of the high energy demands, males can't generate large numbers of both.

Researchers, led by Dr Scott Pitnick from Syracuse University in New York, found the link between testicle and brain size after looking at more than 300 species of bats.

In many species, females are unusually promiscuous, so males have evolved enormous testicles, at the expense of their brains.

In species with rampantly promiscuous females, pea-brained males with large testicles stand a better chance of having offspring than less fertile but brainier rivals.

AAP

United States and torture

Friday, December 09, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/united-states-and-torture.html>

The position of the United States on torture is a convoluted and complex one. In fact, it is very difficult to know exactly what its position is with smoke and mirrors and “doublespeak” at every corner, though it seems obvious to everyone that the US does use torture (at least by its proxies) in its “war against terror”, though it would like to keep that behind “closed doors”.

Recently, US Secretary of State Dr Condoleezza Rice’s stated during her tour of Europe while in the Ukraine that the US was bound by the UN Convention against Torture and that it,

“...extends to US personnel wherever they are, whether they are in the US or outside of the US.”

This is an “apparent” major shift in US policy.

Of note, one aide to Dr Rice was quoted to say that this was a “clarification of policy, not a shift”. **This offhand quotation is in fact, rather profound.** Recently, I reported President Bush in his speech in Panama where he claimed that the “US does not torture”. Simultaneously, of course, Vice President Cheney and the White House were threatening to veto a bill that would ban torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners

(or at least introduce an exemption for the CIA and thus rendering the bill impotent).

And hence, the carefully crafted misdirection and guile. Dr Rice has said exactly what the Europeans wanted to hear to “satisfy” their anti-torture position. She herself, as the representative to the United States, has not “technically” lied. However, I think that one can assume that official US policy is that US personnel don’t commit acts of torture themselves (at least, not in an incriminating way if audited). Rather, the whole point of “extraordinary rendition” is to send the “victim” to a US controlled base or facility in an allied country that don’t have scruples against torture (e.g., Egypt, Afghanistan, etc.)

I still consider this “torture by proxy” and it is quite obviously the truth in substance. There is absolutely no need to send someone off to Afghanistan for “interrogation” unless you want to do something that is actually contrary to US domestic law. From my point of view, there is no qualitative difference between torture and knowingly sending someone to be tortured by someone else. Both acts are equally reprehensible.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4506682.stm>

US ‘shifts’ position on torture

The US secretary of state says the UN treaty on torture applies to American interrogators in the US and overseas, in an apparent shift in US policy.

The Bush administration has previously said the convention, which bans cruel, inhumane and degrading treatment, does not apply to US personnel abroad.

Correspondents say a reason for the shift might be pressure from Congress.

Condoleezza Rice's European tour has been dogged by claims the CIA used foreign bases to hold terror suspects.

The UN high commissioner for human rights has called on the US to provide information about any secret detention centres and to provide access to them.

Louise Arbour said such detention centres could create conditions where torture might be used, but she welcomed Ms Rice's statement.

Pressure

Ms Rice said the US was bound by the UN Convention against Torture (CAT).

It "extends to US personnel wherever they are, whether they are in the US or outside the US," Ms Rice said in Ukraine.

Her comments appear to contrast with the US Attorney-General, Alberto Gonzales, who said last year the convention did not apply to US interrogations of foreigners overseas.

US officials travelling with Ms Rice were quoted by Reuters news agency as saying it represented a marked shift in US policy.

But, according to AFP news agency, one aide to Ms Rice said her remarks were "a clarification of policy, not a shift".

The BBC's Justin Webb in Washington says Ms Rice's comments signal an important change in US policy on the use of harsh methods of interrogation – and an apparent softening of the White House position.

The White House has allowed the CIA to use practices such as mock drowning of prisoners, which would almost certainly be considered unacceptable under the terms of the convention, our correspondent says.

Some former detainees have alleged they were part of a US network of “ghost flights” and secret prisons run by the CIA around the world.

They claim they were subjected to beatings, electric shock treatments and solitary confinement during their detention.

Ms Rice has admitted that terror suspects are flown abroad for interrogation under a process called rendition, but denied they were tortured.

She refused to address the claims of secret CIA prisons abroad where suspects could be interrogated without reference to international law.

A number of senior Republicans have been campaigning recently for the White House to be clearer in defining and banning torture.

Claims and denials

Claims that the CIA was holding al-Qaeda suspects in eastern Europe, Thailand and Afghanistan were first reported on 2 November.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said it had evidence that suspects were taken to Poland and Romania.

Both Poland and Thailand on Wednesday reiterated their denials that any secret CIA jails were allowed to operate on their territory. Romania has also dismissed the claims.

Germany, Spain, Sweden and Iceland are all investigating claims that CIA planes landed at their airports while transporting terror suspects.

Pacifiers and cot death

Saturday, December 10, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/pacifiers-and-cot-death.html>

There have been a number of studies previously which show that using a pacifier (or a “dummy”) reduces the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). This appears to have been once again confirmed in a new population based study which found that the risk of SIDS decreased by 90%.

It is hypothesised that the “bulk” of the dummy helps prevent accidental hypoxia (e.g., if the face becomes buried in soft bedding).

However, this study only looked as to whether the baby used a dummy on their last sleep. It is still unclear whether the risk is even greater on a baby who is used to a dummy and then stops.

The take home message? If you use a dummy for your baby, then it should be used consistently for every sleep.

Source article

http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn8437&feedId=online-news_rss20

Pacifiers dramatically cut risk of cot death

- 00:01 09 December 2005
- NewScientist.com news service
- Gaia Vince

Babies who sleep with a pacifier (dummy) have a reduced risk of cot death, according to a new population-based study. Using a pacifier also appears to help mitigate against some risk factors for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), such as less safe sleeping positions, the researchers say.

They study found a 90% reduced risk of SIDS in babies who used a pacifier, compared to those who did not. Sucking a thumb also appeared to reduce SIDS risk. De-Kun Li, who carried out the work with colleagues at Kaiser Permanente Northern California in Oakland, US, believes pacifiers may be a useful public health tool for preventing SIDS.

However, the UK's Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (FIDS) cautions that while the new study appears convincing, the overall picture remains very complicated. For example, the question of whether failing to give a pacifier to a baby who is used to getting one is more risky than never giving a pacifier remains unclear.

Li's team interviewed mothers and carers of 185 infants who died from SIDS and those of 312 matched controls. For the children that died, they asked about the child's last night, and for the controls about the night before the interview. The questions covered pacifier usage and environmental risk factors such as sleeping position and whether adults in the home were smokers.

As well as the reduced risk of death, the study showed that using a pacifier cancelled out the risks posed by other known risk factors, such as very soft bedding.

Bulky handle

Li says one explanation for the results may be the bulky external handle common to many pacifiers. "Pacifiers may prevent accidental hypoxia as a result of the face being buried into soft bedding, or overlain by objects such

as blankets, by providing an air passage created by the bulky handle,” he suggests.

Another possibility, he told New Scientist is that “sucking on a pacifier may enhance the development of neural pathways that control the potency of the upper airway”.

However, the study did not look at whether the babies habitually slept with a pacifier, only whether they used a pacifier on their last sleep. A study in 2000 suggested that the risk for SIDS only increases for babies who are used to sleeping with a pacifier and then stop.

But a review of nine studies, published in October 2005, also found sleeping with pacifiers was associated with a 50% reduced risk of SIDS, although it also failed to examine habitual use.

The FIDS spokesperson notes another complication – that the study suggests no benefit from using a pacifier in some of the babies most at risk of cot death, such as those with low birthweight. “There is no reason for parents not to use a pacifier but if they do, they must use it every time the baby sleeps,” she adds.

Pacifier use has a history of controversy in relation to teeth and jaw development, with some health professionals advising against their use.

Journal reference: British Medical Journal (Online first)

Law lords rule against torture

Sunday, December 11, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/law-lords-rule-against-torture.html>

Although the United States and United Kingdom are the primary partners in the “War against Terror”, there are some interesting disparate points of view. I have already written several blogs on the US and torture. The message from Washington is ultimately that they consider torture to be a valid tool if wielded by the US against its “enemies”.

The UK law lords, however, have ruled that “secret evidence which might have been obtained by torture cannot be used against terror suspects in UK courts”. As per senior law lord, Lord Bingham:

“Torture and its fruits have been regarded with abhorrence for over five centuries in English law.”

This decision will have a significant influence on countries like Australia. Although we do not necessarily follow UK law, precedents and rulings are often used as arguments and justifications within the Australian legal system.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4510866.stm>

Torture ruling's international impact

By Jon Silverman

Legal affairs analyst

The law lords have ruled that secret evidence which might have been obtained by torture cannot be used against terror suspects in UK courts – what are the implications?

Like the Pinochet judgment of 1999 which held that former heads of state did not have immunity from torture charges, this law lords ruling, too, will have international reverberations.

It is a trenchant affirmation of the supremacy of the common law over the procedural rules of the Special Immigration Appeals Commission.

Five centuries

As the senior law lord, Lord Bingham, said: “Torture and its fruits” have been regarded with abhorrence for over five centuries in English law.

But in July 2002, SIAC decided that it was entitled to consider evidence which may have been obtained under torture. That decision is now null and void.

The effect of the law lords' judgment may be felt in countries which also have a common law system, such as Canada and Australia.

And even the United States will take note of it.

Carla Ferstman, Director of Redress, one of the 14 human rights organisations which were a party to the case, said: “ This must have an impact on the process known as extraordinary rendition.

“There is already an inquiry by the government of Canada into the seizure and rendition of a Syrian-Canadian citizen to Syria where he was tortured.

“I hope that the law lords’ declaration will put even more pressure on the US and other countries to stop the practice.”

Standard of proof

Although the judgment on the substantive issue was unanimous, the law lords disagreed about a significant matter – standard of proof.

Three took the view that if, after an inquiry, SIAC could not reach a decision on whether evidence had been obtained under torture, it should exclude it.

But the majority held that SIAC was entitled to admit such evidence if it was left in doubt about how it had been gathered.

Given that chunks of SIAC hearings are held in secret, even the lawyers for appellants may not know why the commission has decided to admit some evidence, despite claims that it has been tainted by the use of torture.

The law lords addressed the important ethical dilemma of whether the police or security forces should act on information which was the product of torture.

Lord Nicholls summed up their view that “it would be ludicrous for them to disregard information about a ticking bomb if it had been procured by torture.”

But this was not the same as using that information in legal proceedings.

SIAC will now have to review all the cases on which it has reached a decision, where torture may have been a factor in the gathering of evidence.

Whether the government will be deflected from its policy of trying to reach memoranda of understanding with states where torture is practised remains to be seen.

A short black for me and another for my liver

Sunday, December 11, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/short-black-for-me-and-another-for-my.html>



Over the years, coffee has gone from being vilified to being good to being bad again. What this does mean is that on the whole, a few cups of your favourite brew per day won't do much harm (or much good) for you.

A study recently published in the journal *Gastroenterology* demonstrated that those people who drank more than two cups of tea or coffee per day developed chronic liver disease at half the rate of those who drank less than one cup per day. The protection was from liver disease from alcohol, obesity and haemachromatosis. It did not provide protection from other causes such as from viral hepatitis.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/world/coffee-reduces-liver-risk-study-finds/2005/12/05/1133631180081.html>

Coffee reduces liver risk, study finds

December 5, 2005 – 12:21PM

Coffee and tea may reduce the risk of serious liver damage in people who drink alcohol too much, are overweight, or have too much iron in the blood, researchers reported on Sunday.

The study of nearly 10,000 people showed that those who drank more than two cups of coffee or tea a day developed chronic liver disease at half the rate of those who drank less than one cup each day.

The study, conducted by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases and Social and Scientific Systems, Inc, found that coffee provided no protection to people at risk of liver disease from other causes, such as viral infections.

“While it is too soon to encourage patients to increase their coffee and tea intake, the findings of our study potentially offer people at high risk for developing chronic liver disease a practical way to decrease that risk,” said Constance Ruhl, who helped lead the study.

“In addition, we hope the findings will offer guidance to researchers who are studying liver disease progression.”

Writing in the American Gastroenterological Association journal *Gastroenterology*, Dr Ruhl and colleagues said caffeine seemed to hold the key.

They analysed the records of 9849 participants in a government survey whose coffee and tea intake was evaluated and who were followed for about 19 years.

Reuters

Ethnic tensions ignite on Cronulla beach

Monday, December 12, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/ethnic-tensions-ignite-on-cronulla.html>

Yesterday, the ugly side of Australian society came to head on Cronulla beach. The undercurrent of racist sentiment formed a mob bent on violence. Apart from the very stupid few (the list of morons here include: **Marcus Butcher** of Penrith, “Steely” aka **Glen Steele** of Cronulla, **Todd Russell**, **John Moffitt** (Australia First Party), **Paul Wilson** of “Sons of Anzacs”), most commentators have unanimously condemned the riot for what it is; a disgusting and violent display of racism. “Contrarian” Andrew West goes so far as to even dub it a “pogrom”.

Writers in the various popular papers blame any number of groups and issues; Lebanese gangs, surfer “yobbo”, the media “whipping up a frenzy”, the police for being under prepared, perhaps “multiculturalism”, or “white extremists” infiltrating the crowd, all with a liberal splash of alcohol. Unfortunately, this “point the finger” blame game does little if any good. Undoubtedly, the best opinion piece I have read today on the Cronulla riots was by Stepan Kerkyasharian, the chairman of the Community Relations Commission and the president of the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW. He writes:

“The Australian way of life they claim to uphold includes the tradition of civil

obedience and support for the lawful institutions of this land. Thugs terrorising beachgoers are not the product of multiculturalism, just as vigilantes are not the product of Australian heritage.

Let us all get behind our police force and bring the perpetrators to justice, regardless of their background.”

I concur entirely.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/national/worst-possible-outcome-vigilantes-rip-unity-to-shreds/2005/12/11/1134235951337.html>

Worst possible outcome – vigilantes rip unity to shreds

December 12, 2005

Forget race and bring all criminals to justice, writes Stepan Kerkyasharian.

YESTERDAY we witnessed a sight that I thought we would never see in Australia.

A few years ago Australians of all backgrounds – indigenous, Muslim, Asian, European – united to display national pride, Australian pride, to put on the best ever Olympics.

A few weeks ago tens of thousands of people, young and old, combined to help our Socceroos ride the wave to the World Cup. Those Australians were, again, of all backgrounds. Young girls wearing the Islamic hijab were proudly displaying green and gold.

And then at North Cronulla beach we had a bunch of thugs bashing that great symbol of Australian devotion to their countrymen, surf lifesavers.

It is sad that these thugs appear to be more or less of the same ethnic background, or are perceived to be, because that causes pain to the hundreds of thousands of people of that background who live and work peacefully. That community's leaders condemn the actions of these young thugs just as the rest of us do. Yesterday, as if on cue, people took this opportunity to reclaim territory – whatever that means.

What we now have is the worst possible development in any society – people taking the law into their own hands, contributing directly to the breakdown of law and order.

People formed vigilante groups, using telephone text messages to whip up hatred of people of a particular race or religion. This is no different to what the thugs are accused of doing.

Those who participated in the war of Cronulla should revisit the scenes they created, so vividly captured on our TV screens, and ask themselves if they are really different to the thugs they set out to discipline.

What happened in Cronulla was an attempt at organised and premeditated mob violence. There's no other way to describe it.

The Australian way of life they claim to uphold includes the tradition of civil obedience and support for the lawful institutions of this land. Thugs terrorising beachgoers are not the product of multiculturalism, just as vigilantes are not the product of Australian heritage.

Let us all get behind our police force and bring the perpetrators to justice, regardless of their background.

Stepan Kerkyasharian is the chairman of the Community Relations Commission and the president of the Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW.

China: an economic powerhouse

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/china-economic-powerhouse.html>

China's foreign trade in 2005 was worth \$US 1.2 trillion (approximately \$AU 1.7 trillion), a very respectable value. Even more impressive is when you consider that this value had **risen by a staggering 23% in the past year!** China's trade surplus had **trebled** in 2005!

Furthermore, as a sign of things to come, China has surpassed the United States and is now the world's largest exporter of hi-tech goods. This was also the year we saw the Chinese company Lenovo purchase the personal computer business section of the iconic American company IBM.

China is well on the road to becoming a world superpower. However, advances in economic development have not been matched by improvements in social development or in human rights. I fear that China will become what "leftist" commentators fear that US is becoming. Oceania versus Eastasia anyone?

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4522498.stm>

China's trade surplus hits \$90bn

Soaring export levels have trebled China's trade surplus for the first 11 months of 2005 to \$90.8bn (£51.7bn).

China's Ministry of Commerce said that total foreign trade had risen by 23% this year, and was worth \$1.2 trillion.

The European Union is still China's main trading partner, trading goods and services worth \$196.7bn so far in 2005.

The surplus has been criticised in the US, with claims that it is boosted by the artificially low exchange rate of China's currency, the yuan.

China has also had to seek increased textile limits with both the US and Europe, after its exports surged since the end of an agreed international framework at the start of this year.

Hi-tech exports

Yet China's recent export bonanza is not just driven by cheap manufactured goods.

A new report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development claims that China has now overtaken the United States as the world's largest exporter of hi-tech goods like computers, mobile phones and digital cameras.

Many US and European technology companies have either been investing heavily in China or found themselves being bought by Chinese companies.

Last May, Chinese computer maker Lenovo bought the personal computer (PC) business of IBM for \$1.75bn.

China exported \$180bn worth of hi-tech equipment in 2004, outstripping US exports of \$149bn, and giving it a surplus of \$45bn.

However, China still depends heavily on imports for the computer chips and components it needs to assemble hi-tech equipment, and its trade deficit in components grew to \$62bn in the same year.

IT industry just doesn't understand health

Tuesday, December 13, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/it-industry-just-doesnt-understand.html>

David L Margulius, a “senior contributing editor” at *InfoWorld* wrote an interesting article on doctors and their PDAs. He quotes a study on doctors that found that more than 70% of doctors think electronic medical records systems will help them provide better patient care and run more efficient practices. At the same he ponders the questions as to “why do they have the reputation for being the most notorious, heels-dug-in Luddites?”

His answer? **Ego.**

And in that answer it betrays the whole reason why the IT industry does not get much respect in the field of health care.

Doctors tend (compared to the rest of the population) to be well educated, wealthy, but time poor. As such, we like our toys. The large proportion of doctors I know have a PDA, and actually use it too. The large proportion of my non-medical friends do not. Then why do doctors often not like “IT creep” into the workplace?

The answer, is that in our work, we are often faced with time critical decisions and management. Though many IT assisted

systems are good, the previous technology, **paper**, is remarkably reliable.

Paper never crashes. It never has any down time. It does not depend on electricity. Many people write faster than they can type. You can draw diagrams. Everyone has their own pen (while there are at most a handful of ward consoles/workstations).

I have worked with many partially computerised health systems. Nothing is as reliable as paper and hard copies. Where computerised systems have made big inroads (and hence much appreciated by doctors and other health professionals) is in electronic pathology results (fast and universal access), electronic radiology (same reason), online textbooks and clinical resources, and electronic discharge letters. Basically, information gathering and extraction but not data entry.

Unfortunately, what many IT systems managers don't seem to realise, is that if the computerised systems fail, there must be a smooth and painless contingency (usually, with paper). If there is no or poor contingency (which often is the case), patients lives are at risk as the system is geared to fill the extra efficiency in the clinical practice that has become the "norm".

Yes, we are particular, but don't call us Luddites for demanding a level of quality, reliability and performance that often cannot

be delivered by the IT industry. “Beta” level quality may be acceptable to some, but not in health care.

Source article

http://www.infoworld.com/article/05/12/09/500Panalysts_1.html

Doctors turn to PDAs

By David L. Margulius

December 09, 2005

I don't usually watch ER-type TV shows, but I've lately been intrigued by the latest ABC hit, *Grey's Anatomy*. If you've seen it, then you know that the whole staff of Seattle Grace Hospital is young, has lots of sex, and hardly ever sleeps. But have you noticed that they don't spend much time at computers either?

In fact, the cast makes it look like IT hasn't made any progress in health care at all. The doctors stride into a room knowing all the diseases and treatments from memory and almost never refer to a PDA or other electronic device.

How does this square with doctors' attitudes and behaviors in the real world? A new Forrester Research survey of 1,300 doctors reports that four out of five doctors say technology “makes life easier.” Although consumers as a whole are split evenly between technology optimists and pessimists, among doctors there are four technology optimists for every pessimist. And more than 70 percent of doctors said they think electronic medical records systems will help them provide better patient care and run more efficient practices.

According to the survey, doctors use IT systems constantly – for evaluating treatment options, supporting diagnoses, getting lab results and medical records, and a host of other crucial tasks. So what gives? If doctors are so keen on IT, why do they have the reputation for being the most notorious,

heels-dug-in Luddites? And why do we continue to portray them on TV as unplugged heroes – have scalpel, will travel?

Two words: knowledge worker. “If egos were gravity,” one health-care CIO recently said, “this hospital would be the largest black hole in the universe.” Like consultants, accountants, lawyers, and even computer programmers, doctors are the top of the food chain of educated, can-do humanoids. Even in real life, they’ll use IT systems, but the idea of letting someone else control those systems – or of giving those systems much credit for their individual virtuoso performances – is a nonstarter.

So if you’re an IT worker in the health-care sector, be proud you’re helping to save lives but don’t expect to ever have a sexy TV show.

Howard's denial

Thursday, December 15, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/howards-denial.html>



See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has continued to downplay the events in Cronulla. His denial that there is a racist element to violence is simply rather extraordinary. It is hard to imagine what else a large group of people chanting “Fuck off Leb!” could be thinking.

Although I do agree that the “ordinary” Australian (or at least the Australian “ideal”) is compassionate and fair, there is at the same time, an undercurrent of racism. If not for the disgusting and violent behaviour of the crowd in Cronulla, the “us versus them” mentality actually had a reasonable degree of support within some parts of the community.

Although the “White Australia Policy” has officially been relegated to the dustbin of history, its sentiment is still very much alive in the minds of the population.

Source article

<http://smh.com.au/news/national/nations-image-is-unhurt-pm/2005/12/13/1134236063912.html>

Nation's image is unhurt – PM

By Stephanie Peatling

December 14, 2005

THE race riots will not affect Australia's international reputation, says the Prime Minister, John Howard.

“Every country has incidents that don't play well overseas,” Mr Howard said yesterday before he left for the East Asia Summit.

“You have outbreaks of domestic discord, that happens to every country, and when it occurs there's publicity, but people make a judgment about this country over a longer term.

“They don't make judgments about Australia on incidents that occur over a period of a few days.”

But the Opposition's foreign affairs spokesman, Kevin Rudd, disagreed. He said: “Blind Freddy can tell you this is having an impact on Australia's international standing.”

With TV images of the riots being seen around the world, Mr Rudd said anyone who believed Australia's reputation would not be affected was “burying their head in the sand”.

Mr Howard said he stood by comments he made on Monday, when he insisted Australia was not a racist country.

“Violence, thuggery, loutish behaviour, smashing peoples’ property, intimidating people – all of those things are breaches of the law and I don’t think the actions should be given some kind of special status because they occur against the background of this or that,” Mr Howard said.

The former One Nation leader Pauline Hanson said she was disgusted by the violence on both sides in the clashes.

“I’m very upset by it,” Ms Hanson said. She said that while she had long warned that frustration with multiculturalism could boil over, she condemned any form of violence.

“It doesn’t get anyone anywhere,” she said. “We all have to live here in this country.

“I don’t advocate violence, because it’s the average people who are going to suffer – the people who fear walking down the street or going to the beach.

“We don’t need these hooligans here. I don’t care whether they are white Anglo-Saxon-Celtic Australians, or from another country, it is unacceptable for Australia and we don’t want it on our streets.”

Ms Hanson, who found success on a platform opposing multiculturalism and immigration policies, said some migrants fuelled tensions by refusing to adapt to “the Australian way of life”.

But she said she agreed with the Prime Minister that Australia was not inherently a racist country.

Bird flu in the Ukraine

Friday, December 16, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/bird-flu-in-ukraine.html>

The H5N1 bird influenza continues its westward march, at least in birds. Dead poultry in the Ukraine have tested positive for the virus, though there are no reported human cases.

At this time, bird flu has “officially” killed about 70 people in Asia, though there are reports that China is grossly under-reporting their number of cases.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4527706.stm>

Ukraine confirms bird flu cases

Tests on some of the poultry found dead in Ukraine have shown that they had the lethal H5N1 bird flu strain.

The health ministry confirmed that the deadly strain of the virus was found in the Crimea peninsula.

Tests show it is present in 11 out of 25 villages which have been affected by the disease, a statement said.

The Ukraine president introduced a state of emergency in the affected region two weeks ago. There have been no human cases.

Neighbouring Russia and Romania have already reported outbreaks of the H5N1 strain of bird flu.

Ukraine officials have carried out tests on people in the Crimea and given vaccinations. Quarantines have also been imposed on some villages.

A mass cull of more than 50,000 domestic poultry has also been carried out.

The H5N1 strain of bird flu has killed nearly 70 people in Asia.

E-ink devices finally in 2006?

Saturday, December 17, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/e-ink-devices-finally-in-2006.html>



Philips' new e-book reader

E-ink, the revolutionary display technology that is both extremely low power and gives “paper-like” quality will perhaps finally be used in commercially available products from next year. At

this time, the only E-ink device was the Sony Libre, an e-book reader that was only released in Japan, expensive and hobbled by draconian DRM.

Engadget reports that Philips is planning on releasing an e-book reader using the E-ink display. One hopes that it will not be the travesty that was the Libre. I'm rather fond of the concept of e-books myself and generally I read them on my Pocket PC. Convenient that it may be, a



Seiko's e-paper watch

Pocket PC still has a small screen (compared to say a magazine or paperback) and a limited battery life.

Announced earlier this year, Seiko released their concept watch that use E-ink technology for the display. It is mind-numbingly

expensive, but with its limited release, it is almost a given that this will become a collector's item. Unlike the first LCD watch released by Casio, the Seiko watch actually does look rather cool.



New clock by Citizen

At the other end of the spectrum, Citizen is releasing their 52 inches wide (i.e., humungous) wall clock that again uses the electronic paper display by E-ink. It's for those who really like looking at the time. Like the Seiko watch it is

expensive, pointless but cool.



E-ink colour e-paper prototype

While browsing at the E-ink website, I noticed that they have now produced a working E-book prototype with a colour E-ink display! Will 2006 finally be the year of electronic paper?

Source articles

<http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000700072616/>

Philips spinoff iRex plans ebook reader

Posted Dec 14, 2005, 6:30 PM ET by Marc Perton

The latest ebook reader that won't take the world by storm is apparently coming soon from a Philips spinoff called iRex Technologies. The Dutch company showed off a prototype earlier this month, and plans a launch for early next year. According to reports, the iRex will use E-ink technology (not surprising, since Philips helped develop and fund E-ink), and has also been put together by some of the same developers who worked on Sony's mega-successful Librie. No info yet on pricing or specs. We like E-ink, and would certainly like to see ebooks take off in a real way. But face it, until readers are cheap, easy to use, have color displays, and have a common platform for software and DRM (not to mention a critical mass of available books), they're going to remain expensive novelty items.

<http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000570039801/>

Seiko debuts e-paper wristwatch

Posted Apr 12, 2005, 7:33 AM ET by Barb Dybwad

Seiko Epson has been promising they'd be rocking the e-paper, and they've finally put out. It isn't exactly the foldable, electronic newspaper of the future, but it's at least something unique in the arena of timepieces. They partnered with the Seiko Watch corporate division to develop a wristwatch whose display, made of e-paper, shows a constantly changing mosaic pattern along with the conventional time display. Seiko Epson hooked up with the E Ink corporation in the US to develop the display, which combines E Ink's electrophoretic paper with Seiko's driver interface to produce a monochrome display with a contrast ratio of 10:1. Look for units to roll out to the public in Japan sometime this year.

<http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000967072774/>

Citizen's flexible e-ink wall clock nears release

Posted Dec 15, 2005, 5:05 PM ET by Evan Blass

Seiko Spectrum wristwatch not got enough e-ink for your tastes? Well why not try out Citizen's upcoming flexible digital wall clock, which measures 21-inches high by 52-inches wide and can wrap around corners, so you'll always know either the hour or the minute depending on where you sit. Citizen claims the battery life is 20 times longer than traditional digital clocks, which is a good thing, because you'll need the money you save on batteries to afford the \$4000+ pricetag. Seems like only a Japanese release to start with, but we're sure it'll soon find a home in our country of supersized, overpriced objets d'art.

Doctrine of “pre-emptive” war

Saturday, December 17, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/doctrine-of-pre-emptive-war.html>

Bush and his current administration have embraced the concept of “pre-emptive war”. Though seemingly supported by many, foolishly, the doctrine of “pre-emptive war” is the greatest threat to world peace and stability and an anathema to democracy. As per Bush in his recent speech at the Woodrow Wilson Centre in Washington:

“In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long,” he said in a speech aimed at shoring up flagging US support for the conflict.’

... and the penny drops. A pre-emptive war (or pre-emptive strike) is justified on the notion of self-defence. However, for this to be legal in the eyes of international law, the attack from enemy must be certain and inevitable. What Bush so eloquently states is in fact “preventive war”. This is illegal and an unjustified use of aggression.

Bush and Co. are purporting a state of international affairs where the United States reserves the right to attack who it wants to, when it wants to, the “UN and international law be damned” as long as the US deems the target of its wrath as a “threat”. Let us look at the case of Iraq.

None of the countries surrounding Iraq (including “enemies” such as Iran, Kuwait, and Israel) considered it a military threat. And yet, the United States, the sole world superpower with the most powerful military might in the history of mankind, geographically separated from Iraq by half the globe felt that Iraq was such an “imminent threat” that it must invade under the doctrine of preventive war... oops, “*pre-emptive*” war.

The perpetual glamorised spin is interesting. Bush says:

“[Iraq] will be a model for the Middle East. Freedom in Iraq will inspire reformers from Damascus to Tehran.”

Perhaps Bush should actually ask what the people from Damascus to Tehran think about the war. In a poll of six Arab countries in October:

- 78% thought that there was more terrorism because the US invasion
- 80% stated that the war had brought less peace to the region
- 58% stated that Iraq was LESS democratic than before the war
- Of nations that posed the biggest threat to their nations, the majority chose Israel and the United States

George Orwell was right. “War is peace”.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20051214/wl_mideast_afp/iraqvoteusbush

Bush defends Iraq invasion, preemptive war doctrine

Wed Dec 14, 5:40 PM ET

WASHINGTON (AFP) – One day before Iraq's historic parliamentary elections, US President George W. Bush defended his decision to invade that country and reserved the right to preemptive war in the future.

“In an age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, if we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long,” he said in a speech aimed at shoring up flagging US support for the conflict.

The president took responsibility for launching the March 2003 invasion based on intelligence that “turned out to be wrong” about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction, none of which were found.

“As president, I'm responsible for the decision to go into Iraq – and I'm also responsible for fixing what went wrong by reforming our intelligence capabilities. And we're doing just that,” he said.

The US president, who embraced preemptive war as US strategy after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, did not name any potential targets, but said the Iraq vote would put pressure on the governments of Iran and Syria.

“We are living through a watershed moment in the story of freedom,” he said. Iraq “will be a model for the Middle East. Freedom in Iraq will inspire reformers from Damascus to Tehran.”

Bush's job approval ratings have sunk sharply since his November 2004 reelection because of high gas prices, worries about the economy and

growing concerns about Iraq as the US death toll has risen beyond 2,140 soldiers.

The president said Sunni Arabs, who have fueled the bloody insurgency, were increasingly abandoning violence to take part in their country's politics and would turn out in large numbers Thursday after boycotting January elections.

Non-Iraqi extremists and Saddam loyalists "lack popular support, and over time, they can be marginalized and defeated by the security forces of a free Iraq," said Bush.

He also warned that violence would continue even after the vote, and laid out how to measure progress towards the day when the United States can bring home its roughly 160,000 troops.

Bush said victory will have been achieved when extremists and Saddam loyalists are no longer a threat to Iraq's democracy, when Iraqi security forces are self-sufficient and when Iraq is not a "safe haven" for terrorists.

"These objectives, not timetables set by politicians in Washington, will drive our force levels in Iraq," said the president. "We cannot – and will not – leave Iraq until victory is achieved."

Bush acknowledged that the war had sharply divided the United States and that intelligence about Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons programs had turned out to be false, but he sharply rebuked "irresponsible" charges that he had deliberately misled the country.

"These charges are pure politics. They hurt the morale of our troops," he declared, saying that even countries which opposed the war agreed that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction.

But US media have quoted French and German intelligence officials in recent weeks as saying that they repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, warned Washington that crucial parts of its case for war were flawed or outright false.

German intelligence officials warned their US counterparts that accounts from an Iraqi defector code-named Curveball, a critical US source for charges that Iraq possessed mobile germ weapons labs, could not be confirmed and, in many cases, were deeply suspect, The Los Angeles Times reported in November.

The same daily quoted a former senior French intelligence official on Sunday as saying that Paris tried for months to warn the CIA that there was no evidence to support a US allegation that Iraq had tried to purchase nuclear weapons material in Africa.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20051202/ts_nm/mideast_usa_poll_dc

Arab nations deeply suspicious of US motives: poll

By Sue Fleming Fri Dec 2, 12:19 PM ET

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – Arab nations are acutely suspicious of the Bush administration's "democracy" agenda in the Middle East and believe the U.S. invasion of Iraq has made the region less secure, said a poll released on Friday.

The poll, conducted in six Arab countries in October, found 78 percent of respondents thought there was more terrorism because of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, with four out of five saying the war had brought less peace to the region.

Asked which countries posed the biggest threat to their nations, a majority chose Israel and the United States.

“The one fascinating outcome of this study is that the respondents view the United States and its policies through the prism of Iraq and Israel,” said Professor Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland, who conducted the poll with Zogby International in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Rather than being a model to inspire Arab nations to adopt democratic goals, Telhami said respondents felt the opposite was true of the United States, whose image has been tarnished by scandals involving abuse by U.S. forces of detainees in Iraq, Afghanistan and at a U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The Bush administration has made spreading democracy in the Middle East a key foreign policy goal and the State Department has appointed a special envoy, Karen Hughes, to improve the U.S. image abroad, especially in Islamic nations. During her overseas trips, however, Hughes has been greeted with Muslim anger over the U.S.-led invasion in Iraq.

In the new poll, 69 percent of those surveyed doubted that spreading democracy was the real U.S. objective. Oil, protecting Israel, dominating the region and weakening the Muslim world were seen as U.S. goals.

“America’s presence in Iraq is seen as a negative. It is scaring people about American intentions and having the opposite intended impact on Arab public opinion,” Telhami said in an interview.

FRANCE AS SUPERPOWER

More than half – 58 percent – said Iraq was less democratic than before the war and three of four said Iraqis were worse off.

Asked from a list of countries which they would like to be the superpower, the first choice was France with 21 percent, followed by China with 13

percent, Pakistan and Germany tied with 10 percent, Britain with 7 percent, the United States with 6 percent and finally Russia with 5 percent.

“It’s troubling for the United States that people are rooting for other countries in this global (superpower) competition,” Telhami said at a news conference.

France, which opposed the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, was also seen as the country where people had the most freedom and its President Jacques Chirac, was the leader most admired by respondents.

The poll was taken before an outbreak of riots in France by disaffected youths, many of them Muslims of North African ethnicity, which provoked Muslim criticism of conditions for minorities in France.

Israeli President Ariel Sharon, U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair were the most disliked by those polled.

On Iran, most of the respondents said the U.S. adversary should have the right to a nuclear program and international pressure should cease while 21 percent said it should be pressured to stop its nuclear ambitions.

Interviewers polled 800 people each from Egypt, Morocco and Saudi Arabia; 500 each were questioned in Jordan and Lebanon and 217 were interviewed in the United Arab Emirates.

The margin of error was 3.5 percentage points to 4.5 percentage points in all the countries, except for the United Arab Emirates, where it was plus or minus 6.8 points.

Wikipedia as good as Encyclopædia Britannica

Tuesday, December 20, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/wikipedia-as-good-as-encyclopedia.html>

The premiere scientific journal *Nature*, has examined a range of scientific entries in both the free Wikipedia, and from the old stalwart Encyclopædia Britannica. In terms of errors, Wikipedia was about as good as Britannica. However, reviewers stated that Wikipedia entries “were often poorly structured or confused”.

It is consistent with what I have found on using Wikipedia. One has to admit that Wikipedia has extraordinary breadth and is amazingly comprehensive. However, many subjects do only contain a minimal entry or are written poorly. Nevertheless, it is free and Wikipedia articles are still much more reliable than the general internet.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4530930.stm>

Wikipedia survives research test

The free online resource Wikipedia is about as accurate on science as the Encyclopedia Britannica, a study shows.

The British journal *Nature* examined a range of scientific entries on both works of reference and found few differences in accuracy.

Wikipedia is produced by volunteers, who add entries and edit any page.

But it has been criticised for the correctness of entries, most recently over the biography of prominent US journalist John Seigenthaler.

Open approach

Wikipedia was founded in 2001 and has since grown to more than 1.8 million articles in 200 languages. Some 800,000 entries are in English.

It is based on wikis, open-source software which lets anyone fiddle with a webpage, anyone reading a subject entry can disagree, edit, add, delete, or replace the entry.

It relies on 13,000 volunteer contributors, many of whom are experts in a particular field, to edit previously submitted articles.

In order to test its reliability, Nature conducted a peer review of scientific entries on Wikipedia and the well-established Encyclopedia Britannica.

The reviewers were asked to check for errors, but were not told about the source of the information.

“Only eight serious errors, such as misinterpretations of important concepts, were detected in the pairs of articles reviewed, four from each encyclopedia,” reported Nature.

“But reviewers also found many factual errors, omissions or misleading statements: 162 and 123 in Wikipedia and Britannica, respectively.”

Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales welcomed the study.

“We’re hoping it will focus people’s attention on the overall level of our work, which is pretty good,” he said.

Writing style

Nature said its reviewers found that Wikipedia entries were often poorly structured and confused.

The Encyclopedia Britannica declined to comment directly on the findings; but a spokesman highlighted the quality of the entries on the free resource.

“But it is not the case that errors creep in on an occasional basis or that a couple of articles are poorly written,” Tom Panelas, director of corporate communications is quoted as saying in Nature.

“There are lots of articles in that condition. They need a good editor.”

Wikipedia came under fire earlier this month from prominent US journalist John Seigenthaler.

The founding editorial director of USA Today attacked a Wikipedia entry that incorrectly named him as a suspect in the assassinations of president John F Kennedy and his brother, Robert.

The false information was the work of Tennessean Brian Chase, who said he was trying to trick a co-worker.

Wikipedia has responded to the criticisms by tightening up procedures.

Next month it plans to begin testing a new mechanism for reviewing the accuracy of its articles.

Iran spiralling in mindless theocracy

Tuesday, December 20, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/iran-spiralling-in-mindless-theocracy.html>

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his ultra-conservative government have taken Iran down a curious if not dangerously unsustainable path. “Curious” in that much of the Iranian youth support liberalisation of Iran, and yet Ahmadinejad was voted in, on a platform of Islamist and populist policies. “Dangerously unsustainable” in that Ahmadinejad is producing policies that increasingly (and unnecessarily) isolate Iran from the world community.

Since his succession of Mohammad Khatami in August 2005, his policies have included his anti-Zionism stance, denial of the Nazi Holocaust, antagonism with the West over nuclear power and now, a ban on “Western” music.

My opinion is that the failure of the West to engage with moderate and reformist leaders like Khatami has undermined the sentiment for modernisation and Westernisation inside Iran. Incredibly, it was during the term of the most “West-friendly” president of Iran that the US dubbed it part of the infamous “axis of evil”.

Source article

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4543720.stm

Iran president bans Western music

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has banned Western and “indecent” music from state-run TV and radio stations.

The ban follows a ruling in October by the Supreme Cultural Revolutionary Council, which he heads, to ban Western songs from the airwaves.

“Blocking indecent and Western music from the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting is required,” a statement from the council said.

Songs by artists such as Eric Clapton and George Michael will be affected.

‘Lack of knowledge’

Songs such as Clapton’s Rush, Michael’s Careless Whisper and The Eagles’ Hotel California are often used as background music on Iranian TV programmes.

Songs by American easy-listening artist Kenny G are also often featured.

“This is terrible,” said Iranian guitarist Babak Riahipour, a musician whose songs featured on state TV and radio. “The decision shows a lack of knowledge and experience.”

Mr Ahmadinejad became president this year promising to reverse a recent series of reforms and return Iran to the ultra-conservative atmosphere of the 1979 revolution.

“Supervision of content from films, TV series and their voice-overs is emphasized in order to support spiritual cinema and to eliminate trite and violence,” the council said on its website in reference to the October ruling.

Mr Ahmadinejad's programme has included sacking more moderate members of the government and replacing them with ex-military commanders and politically inexperienced religious leaders.

In recent weeks he launched an outspoken attack on Israel, calling for the Jewish state to be "wiped off the map".

He also claimed the Nazi Holocaust, which killed six million Jews, was a "myth".

George “Big Brother” Bush

Tuesday, December 20, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/george-big-brother-bush.html>



George “Big Brother” Bush

It has recently been revealed that Bush in 2002 signed a secret order that enabled the shadowy National Security Agency (NSA) to monitor US citizens' telephone and electronic mail without a warrant. Rather than explaining himself and demonstrating a level of embarrassment or at least some contrition, Bush had come out with guns blazing in support of his actions:

“My personal opinion is it was a shameful act for someone to disclose this very important program in time of war...”

However, to be “at war”, the US must have another nation to be “at war” with. Afghanistan and Iraq have both been demolished (in more ways than one) by the US military machine. The “war against terror” is similar to the “war on drugs” or the “war on crime”; is not a “war” in the sense that should give the leader of any nation “wartime powers”. However, this is exactly Bush’s justification. And he wants those powers:

“...for so long as the nation faces the continuing threat of an enemy that wants to kill our American citizens.”

That is, forever.

It is needless to say that the parallels between the current Bush administration and the events of George Orwell’s book *Nineteen Eight-Four* have not been lost amongst many journalists and commentators. In a somewhat satirical (but prophetic) article written by Daniel Kurtzman in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2002, he juxtaposes Bush’s “regime” with Oceania:

PERMANENT WAR

In “1984,” the state remained perpetually at war against a vague and ever- changing enemy. The war took place largely in the abstract, but it served as a convenient vehicle to fuel hatred, nurture fear and justify the regime’s autocratic practices.

Bush’s war against terrorism has become almost as amorphous. Although we are told the president’s resolve is steady and the mission clear, we seem to know less and less

about the enemy we are fighting. What began as a war against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda quickly morphed into a war against Afghanistan, followed by dire warnings about an “Axis of Evil,” the targeting of terrorists in some 50 to 60 countries, and now the beginnings of a major campaign against Iraq. Exactly what will constitute success in this war remains unclear, but the one thing the Bush administration has made certain is that the war will continue “indefinitely.”

MINISTRY OF TRUTH

Serving as the propaganda arm of the ruling party in “1984,” the Ministry of Truth not only spread lies to suit its strategic goals, but constantly rewrote and falsified history. It is a practice that has become increasingly commonplace in the Bush White House, where presidential transcripts are routinely sanitized to remove the president’s gaffes, accounts of intelligence warnings prior to Sept. 11 get spottier with each retelling, and the facts surrounding Bush’s past financial dealings are subject to continual revision.

The Bush administration has been surprisingly up front about its intentions of propagating falsehoods. In February, for example, the Pentagon announced a plan to create an Office of Strategic Influence to provide false news and information abroad to help manipulate public opinion and further its military objectives. Following a public outcry, the Pentagon said it would close the office – news that would have sounded more convincing had it not come from a place that just announced it was planning to spread misinformation.

INFALLIBLE LEADER

An omnipresent and all-powerful leader, Big Brother commanded the total, unquestioning support of the people. He was both adored and feared, and no one dared speak out against him, lest they be met by the wrath of the state.

President Bush may not be as menacing a figure, but he has hardly concealed his desire for greater powers. Never mind that he has mentioned – on no fewer than three occasions – how much easier things would be if he were dictator. By abandoning many of the checks and balances established in the Constitution to keep any one branch of government from becoming too powerful, Bush has already achieved the greatest expansion of executive powers since Nixon. His approval ratings remain remarkably high, and his minions have worked hard to cultivate an image of infallibility. Nowhere was that more apparent than during a recent

commencement address Bush gave at Ohio State, where students were threatened with arrest and expulsion if they protested the speech. They were ordered to give him a “thunderous ovation,” and they did.

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING

The ever-watchful eye of Big Brother kept constant tabs on the citizens of Orwell's totalitarian state, using two-way telescreens to monitor people's every move while simultaneously broadcasting party propaganda.

While that technology may not have arrived yet, public video surveillance has become all the rage in law enforcement, with cameras being deployed everywhere from sporting events to public beaches. The Bush administration has also announced plans to recruit millions of Americans to form a corps of citizen spies who will serve as “extra eyes and ears for law enforcement,” reporting any suspicious activity as part of a program dubbed Operation TIPS – Terrorism Information and Prevention System.

And thanks to the hastily passed USA Patriot Act, the Justice Department has sweeping new powers to monitor phone conversations, Internet usage, business transactions and library reading records. Best of all, law enforcement need not be burdened any longer with such inconveniences as probable cause.

THOUGHT POLICE

Charged with eradicating dissent and ferreting out resistance, the ever-present Thought Police described in “1984” carefully monitored all unorthodox or potentially subversive thoughts. The Bush administration is not prosecuting thought crime yet, but members have been quick to question the patriotism of anyone who dares criticize their handling of the war on terrorism or homeland defense. Take, for example, the way Attorney General John Ashcroft answered critics of his anti-terrorism measures, saying that opponents of the administration “only aid terrorists” and “give ammunition to America's enemies.”

Even more ominous was the stern warning White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer sent to Americans after Bill Maher, host of the now defunct “Politically Incorrect,” called past U.S. military actions “cowardly.” Said Fleischer, “There are reminders to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and this is not a time for remarks like that; there never is.”

What would it take to turn America into the kind of society that Orwell warned about, a society that envisions war as peace, freedom as slavery and ignorance as strength? Would it happen overnight, or would it involve a gradual erosion of freedoms with the people's consent?

Because we are a nation at war – as we are constantly reminded – most Americans say they are willing to sacrifice many of our freedoms in return for the promise of greater security. We have been asked to put our blind faith in government and most of us have done so with patriotic fervor. But when the government abuses that trust and begins to stamp out the freedom of dissent that is the hallmark of a democratic society, can there be any turning back?

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20051220/ts_afp/usattacksintelligence

Bush vows to pursue controversial spy program

Tue Dec 20, 2:34 AM ET

President George W. Bush vowed to extend an unprecedented spy effort targeting US citizens with suspected ties to Al-Qaeda and denied that the program was illegal or an abuse of his power.

In a year-end press conference, the president said he presumed the “shameful” leak that revealed the secret program, first reported in the New York Times on Friday, would trigger a US Justice Department investigation.

“My personal opinion is it was a shameful act for someone to disclose this very important program in time of war,” said the president, who struck a forceful tone throughout the hour-long question-and-answer session.

Bush linked the surveillance effort to the September 11 terrorist strikes and said he would reauthorize it “for so long as the nation faces the continuing threat of an enemy that wants to kill our American citizens.”

“We need to connect the dots before the enemy attacks, not after,” he said as he brushed off a congressional outcry and calls for an investigation into the initiative’s legality, saying he had acted within his wartime powers.

In 2002, Bush signed a secret order enabling the National Security Agency (NSA) to monitor US citizens’ telephone and electronic mail without a warrant when they are in touch with someone abroad, contrary to legal precedent.

US officials including the president struggled to explain why he needed an alternative to the 1978 Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), which requires court approval of wiretaps and electronic surveillance.

And the NSA chief, General Michael Hayden, told reporters that suspected ties to

Osama bin Laden’s group were a requirement for targeting by the program but that “of course” the dragnet sometimes ensnared innocent US citizens.

“Free peoples always have to judge where they want to be on that spectrum between security and liberty,” he said. “Our job is to keep Americans free by making Americans feel safe again.”

Bush said his authority to carry out the program derived from the US Constitution and the US Congress’s vote to authorize the use of force in Afghanistan to wipe out Al-Qaeda after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

But he flatly rejected charges that he had kept the US Congress in the dark about the initiative’s true extent and that his justification for the secret program amounted to laying claim to “unchecked power” in wartime.

“To say ‘unchecked power’ basically is ascribing some kind of dictatorial position to the president, which I strongly reject,” he said. “There is oversight. We’re talking to Congress all the time.”

But Democratic Senator Russell Feingold told NBC television, “This is just an outrageous power grab.”

“Nobody, thought when we passed a resolution to invade Afghanistan and to fight the war on terror, including myself who voted for it, thought that this was an authorization to allow a wiretapping against the law of the United States,” he said.

The president said that the 1978 law had shortcomings at a time when “what is needed in order to protect the American people is the ability to move quickly to detect” potential threats, though he did not elaborate.

Asked why he had not pushed to overhaul FISA over the past four years if that was the case, Bush replied: “An open debate about law would say to the enemy, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do.’ And this is an enemy which adjusts.”

As debate on how to balance civil liberties and the battle against terrorism rumbled on, Bush demanded that recalcitrant senators renew the Patriot Act, which has also attracted concern from the civil liberties lobby.

“The senators ... must stop their delaying tactics, and the Senate must vote to reauthorize the Patriot Act,” he said of the controversial package of law, some of which expire in 12 days.

“We cannot afford to be without this law for a single moment.”

The White House has previously said Bush would not sign a temporary extension of the legislation, something some lawmakers have proposed for the duration of the debate.

As Bush launched his campaign the White House received some good news with a new Washington Post-ABC News poll showing the president's support among Americans had picked up sharply.

After a long and deep slump, Bush's popularity rebounded steeply in the past month, with 47 percent of people voicing overall approval for the president, while 52 percent disapproved, the Washington Post reported on its website.

That compared to just 39 percent approval in the Post/ABC poll at the beginning of November.

Likewise, there was a surge in support for Bush's handling of Iraq, which had been key to the decline in his popularity over the past year.

In the newest poll, 46 percent voiced approval for his Iraq management, 10 percentage points up from November.

And in fighting terrorism, a majority of 56 percent gave Bush support, compared to 48 percent in November.

The Post noted that the surge in favorable views of Bush's administration came largely from conservatives and Republicans, his traditional support base.

Meanwhile, the newspaper reported, there was little change in the view of Bush among moderates, independents and Democrats.

Judge rules against “Intelligent Design”

Friday, December 23, 2005

<http://vitalis.blogspot.com/2005/12/judge-rules-against-intelligent-design.html>

Though perhaps even God Himself cannot save the Board of Education in Kansas, a group of concerned parents in the Pennsylvania town of Dover took the school board to court; and won. The school board had tried to introduce “intelligent design” into science class.

As adroitly stated by Judge Jones:

“Our conclusion today is that it is unconstitutional to teach ID as an alternative to evolution in a public school science classroom... We find that the secular purposes claimed by the board amount to a pretext for the board’s real purpose, which was to promote religion...”

I am continually grateful that the judiciary in the United States is still of high calibre and integrity.

Source article

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4545822.stm>

‘Intelligent design’ teaching ban

A court in the US has ruled against the teaching of “intelligent design” alongside Darwin’s theory of evolution.

A group of parents in the Pennsylvania town of Dover had taken the school board to court for demanding biology classes not teach evolution as fact.

The authorities wanted to introduce the idea that Earth's life was too complicated to have evolved on its own.

Judge John Jones ruled the school board had violated the constitutional ban on teaching religion in public schools.

The 11 parents who brought the case argued that teaching intelligent design (ID) was effectively teaching creationism, which is banned.

They complained that ID – which argues life must have been helped to develop by an unseen power – was tantamount to religious education.

The separation of church and state is enshrined in the US constitution.

The school board argued they had sought to improve science education by exposing pupils to alternatives to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

But Judge Jones said he had determined that ID was not science and “cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents”.

In a 139-page written ruling, the judge said: “Our conclusion today is that it is unconstitutional to teach ID as an alternative to evolution in a public school science classroom.”

He accused school board members of disguising their true motives for introducing the ID policy.

“We find that the secular purposes claimed by the board amount to a pretext for the board's real purpose, which was to promote religion in the public school classroom,” he said.

He banned any future implementation of the policy in Dover schools.

The case, the first of its kind, sets an important precedent in a country where several states have adopted the teaching of ID, reports the BBC's James Coomerasamy in Washington.

Ironically, he adds, it is a somewhat academic ruling in the Dover area since parents there voted last month to replace the school board members who brought in the policy.

That move provoked US TV evangelist Pat Robertson to warn the town was invoking the wrath of God.

A lawyer for the parents said the ruling was a "real vindication" for those families who challenged the school board.

Saddam trial descends into farce

Friday, December 23, 2005

<http://vitualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/saddam-trial-descends-into-farce.html>

The trial of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein and his cohorts by the new government of Iraq has been beset by theatrics, incompetence and numerous delays. Most recently, Saddam has claimed that he has been beaten or at least, mistreated by his American captors; a claim naturally dismissed by the United States and the US backed government of Iraq.



Saddam, a former lawyer, in his element

Nevertheless, the taint is there and considering the events in Iraq since the US led invasion and occupation, it is perhaps not without merit.

I think that it is well recognised by the international community and certainly by the oppressed majority of Iraqi citizens during Saddam's regime that he was a ruthless and totalitarian leader. That being so, fair and considered conduct of the judicial process is paramount for the outcome to be legitimate. It has become increasingly obvious to me that the current trial completely lacks any legitimacy.

Let us take a brief review. At least three lawyers for the defence have been murdered. Other members of the legal team as well as the judiciary have received death threats. Saddam Hussein has shown contempt and disregard for the court which at times have seemed to be unchecked. There is the question as to whether Saddam and his co-accused have been mistreated. The majority of the evidence so far has been hearsay from hidden witnesses describing abuses that don't directly implicate or link Saddam even in the narrow focus of the trial. Furthermore, the question as to the legality of a former head of state of Iraq being tried within an Iraqi court is in fact, a pertinent question. As one US commentator recently described, one wonders as to whether Saddam will actually be found innocent of the charges!

Despite the best intentions of the Iraqi judiciary, the legal proceedings have been sufficiently mired that for many people, it is considered no better than a kangaroo trial. I think that it is time that the current trial be abandoned and a secure and proper process be carried through. In the current turmoil and chaos of Iraq, I doubt that it can be done within its borders. The logical step is to move the trial to the International Criminal Court in The Hague and charge Saddam with crimes against humanity.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20051222/ap_on_re_mi_ea/saddam_trial

Saddam's Claims of Abuse Denied in Court

By MARIAM FAM, Associated Press Writer

Thu Dec 22, 5:48 PM ET

BAGHDAD, Iraq – An investigative judge said Thursday that Iraqi officials repeatedly asked Saddam Hussein and his co-defendants if they had ever been beaten and they answered ‘no’ every time, contradicting the ousted leader’s claim he was abused by American guards.

Judge Raid Juhi told The Associated Press that a medical team would have investigated if Saddam or any of his seven co-defendants had complained of beatings or torture.

The comments came as Saddam’s often-theatrical trial began a monthlong recess following two days of testimony about alleged torture and the deaths of more than 140 Iraqis after a 1982 attempt to kill Saddam in Dujail. The defendants could face death by hanging if convicted.

Like most sessions of the trial so far, Thursday’s had its share of drama. The defense team threatened to walk out and a prosecutor tried to resign, saying he had been insulted by defendant Barazan Ibrahim, the head of the Iraqi intelligence services in 1982.

A day earlier, Saddam told the court he had been beaten “everywhere” on his body, insisting “the marks are still there.” He did not display any marks, but said it took some wounds eight months to heal.

On Thursday, Saddam said American denials that he was beaten could not be believed, noting that no weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq despite President Bush’s prewar claims that Saddam was harboring such weapons.

“The White House lied when it said Iraq had chemical weapons,” Saddam said. “I reported all the wounds I got to three medical committees. ... We are not lying; the White House is lying.”

But Juhi, who prepared the case against Saddam, said that neither the defendants nor their lawyers had ever complained about beatings. Officials also never saw signs of beatings, he said.

The court heard from six witnesses over the two days, including one Thursday who testified from behind the cover of a curtain, sounding as though he struggled to hold back tears while describing the scene at a desert camp where some of the Dujail families were held.

“It was a situation beyond description,” he said. “Women were crying. Children were crying.” Witnesses have the option of not having their identities revealed as a security measure to protect them against reprisals by Saddam loyalists.

Another witness said six of his brothers had been executed and a seventh was killed in Dujail. A third said that his father, uncles and grandmother were taken away by security officials and tortured, and that all but his grandmother were never seen again.

Saddam and his defense lawyers have sought repeatedly to discredit the witnesses, arguing they have been coached and saying many were too young when the alleged atrocities happened. The witness whose father and uncles were never seen again, for example, was 8 in 1982, and a defense attorney got him to admit he hadn't been arrested and hadn't seen any dead bodies.

The defense contends witnesses have failed to directly link their clients to the charges. Several witness, who also are considered plaintiffs in the trial, have said they were lodging complaints against Saddam because as the president he was responsible for the behavior of security services.

In one of the heated exchanges that have become common at the trial, Ibrahim — Saddam's half brother — accused prosecutors of siding against the defendants to absolve themselves of their own background in Saddam's Baath Party. At one point, Ibrahim yelled, "Long live Baath!"

One of the prosecutors, meanwhile, asked the judge if he could resign, complaining that Ibrahim had insulted the prosecution during previous sessions. The judge denied the request.

The judge at one point told Ibrahim to speed up an answer, a request that prompted an angry argument, leading the defense to accuse a guard of making threatening gestures toward Ibrahim. Defense attorneys then said they would walk out if the guard did not leave, and the judge had the guard removed.

After the witnesses finished testifying, the judge adjourned the trial until Jan. 24.

He then held a closed session to hear from Ibrahim, who on Wednesday asked to address the court. The judge said Ibrahim claimed he had "secret and dangerous information," but the defendant's comments Thursday were not released.

The courtroom theatrics and the lengthy diatribes launched by some defendants — especially Ibrahim and Saddam — have prompted some Iraqis to complain the trial is spiraling out of control at times and providing the defendants with a platform to air their political views.

Juhi, the investigative judge, defended the procedures, saying they have gone smoothly.

“The court is very patient and it has every right to hear everyone so that it can figure out all the facts,” he said. “The street focuses on the negative aspects. Let’s focus on the overall picture.”

The Rings of Uranus

Saturday, December 24, 2005

<http://virtualis.blogspot.com/2005/12/rings-of-uranus.html>



Ring-world Uranus

The Hubble Space Telescope is truly one of the marvels of scientific, no, human endeavours of the twentieth century. It has recently discovered the existence of two additional faint rings around Uranus, not previously seen by the Voyager 2 space probe on its journey to the outer solar system and its findings are soon

to be published in Science.

Source article

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20051222/ap_on_sc/uranus_rings

More Rings Are Found Around Planet Uranus

Thu Dec 22, 4:35 PM ET

LOS ANGELES – Astronomers aided by the Hubble Space Telescope have spied two more rings encircling Uranus, the first additions to the planet's ring system in nearly two decades.

The faint, dusty rings orbit outside of Uranus' previously known rings, but within the orbits of its large moons, said Mark Showalter, an astronomer at the SETI Institute in Mountain View, Calif., who made the discovery.

Details will appear online Friday in the journal *Science*. The discovery, announced Thursday, means scientists now believe the seventh planet from the sun possesses 13 rings.

In 1986, *Voyager 2* became the first spacecraft to zip past Uranus and beam back thousands of images of its dazzling rings and numerous moons. It found two new rings in addition to the nine previously discovered from Earth.

Scientists peering through the Hubble Space Telescope made the latest ring discoveries in 2004. Then they went back to process hundreds of images taken by *Voyager* and found the rings in the pictures. Scientists speculate that the rings may not have been discovered during the spacecraft flyby because of their faintness.

The newly discovered rings are made up of short-lived, faint bands of dust grains that are constantly being replenished by erosion of larger space bodies. Scientists think the dust in the outermost ring is being supplied by the moon *Mab*, discovered in 2003.

Scientists also measured changes in the orbits of Uranus' inner moons since 1994. The new measurements suggest the moons are in a "random and chaotic" fashion, said Jack Lissauer of the NASA Ames Research Center.

Because of the moons' instability, scientists think the satellites will collide with one another in the next few million years.

Uranus, four times the diameter of Earth, is one of the solar system's giant, gaseous planets that also include Jupiter, Saturn and Neptune.