

RANDOM SAMPLES

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Anti-Evolution Bill: Back to the Drawing Board

The fate of evolution still hangs in the balance—at least it does in the Tennessee school system. A bill in the state legislature that would have penalized teachers for presenting evolution as “fact” was sent back to committee last week. An amended version could come to a vote later this month.

The original bill attracted attention from the international press, which has made much of the fact that in 1925 Tennessee was home to the famous “Scopes monkey trial,” where jurors fined John Scopes \$100 for unlawfully teaching the topic. The present bill, however, does not ban teaching evolution. Rather, it says: “No teacher or adminis-

trator in a local education agency shall teach the theory of evolution except as a scientific theory. [Anyone] teaching such theory as fact commits insubordination ... and shall be dismissed or suspended. ...”

But the bill hit some snags when it came before the Senate on 4 March. Of six proposed amendments, several were offered by education committee chair Andy Womack (the bill’s lone opponent in his committee), who offered a couple of satirical changes, including one that would prohibit teachers from presenting as fact the “heliocentric theory of planetary rotation.” Another, more sincere,

amendment struck the sentence about teacher insubordination.

Womack told *Science* that he thinks the bill will “receive more scrutiny” from his panel than it did the first time, as senators consider the “policy-setting precedent” it represents in terms of “micromanaging” education. Then, too, the state’s attorney general, Charles W. Burson, threw cold water on the bill in a 26 February opinion, saying it had a religious purpose and was therefore unconstitutional.

An aide to Tommy Burks, sponsor of the bill, says they have “no idea” of its fate. But Eugenie



THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Remembering the past. The Scopes trial courtroom in Nashville, 1925. Scopes’s lawyer Clarence Darrow (in suspenders) stands before his client (seated behind him).

Scott of the National Center for Science Education in El Cerrito, California, says that even if a watered-down version is finally passed, it will hobble biology teaching: “What we have found is when you get regulations that even mention the e-word people just flat stop teaching it.”

Pluto Revealed, A Little

“The door’s closed on the ‘boring Pluto’ idea,” boasts astronomer Alan Stern of the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado. Researchers, after straining at their instruments for decades, knew Pluto had bright poles (*Science*, 19 June 1992, p. 1635), but much beyond that the solar system’s smallest, coldest, and most remote planet was a closed book. Now the Hubble Space



Computer map. Pluto.

Telescope has furnished the first direct look at Pluto, and scientists are both delighted and frustrated. “I don’t know anything in the outer solar system that looks this complex,” says

Stern, referring to the dozen regions of brighter or darker surface the Hubble has revealed.

“It’s difficult to say what the [features] might be,” says Marc Buie of Lowell Observatory, who with Stern processed 12 fuzzy images from the orbiting telescope

into maps of brightness. One possibility is variable snowfall. Astronomers believe the surface is covered with snows of nitrogen, carbon monoxide, and methane. Some is “Colorado snow and some is Boston snow,” says Stern. The brighter stuff is probably nitrogen snow deposited in recent decades, while the dimmer areas are older and dirtied by methane turned to brown gunk by radiation.

Stern and Buie expect Pluto to undergo “a sudden and dramatic change” within the next few decades as it moves away from the sun and chills further, bringing on more snow.

AIDS Vaccine Therapy Trial Launched

The long-awaited, full-scale test of a therapeutic AIDS vaccine made by San Diego’s Immune Response Corporation (IRC) has gotten a go-ahead from the U.S. government and will be under way in the next few weeks.

On 27 February, the Food and Drug Administration gave IRC the green light for a 3-year, 2500-person trial in the United States—the largest ever test of a vaccine in people already infected with HIV. Approval has been delayed because of manufacturing issues surrounding the vaccine, a preparation of

“killed” HIV minus the surface protein gp120, which, in theory, will bolster immune response.

Yet because there is scant evidence that such an approach can work with any other chronic infection, many researchers doubt it can delay AIDS onset in HIV-infected people. Indeed, two other biotech firms, Genentech and British Bio-Technology, have abandoned their therapeutic HIV vaccine projects because of lackluster results from early clinical trials. Nonetheless, results from other large trials of a genetically engineered version of the HIV surface protein gp160 will be released by MicroGeneSys Inc. in mid-April, and Austria’s Immuno AG is soon expected to report results from a trial of a similar vaccine.

James Kahn of the University of California, San Francisco, a principal investigator of the IRC trial, acknowledges “there’s not a clear proposed mechanism for activity of these compounds.” But he says the IRC trial will supply an “unambiguous” answer as to whether a vaccine can delay AIDS onset. Kahn adds that participants won’t have to stop taking any other anti-HIV medications, so “we don’t think we’re putting any patients at risk.”

Infectious Network

Aiming at people in developing nations, Yale University’s School of Public Health has set up what it calls “the first regularly scheduled global Internet channel for scientific research.” It’s a seminar on emerging infectious diseases that will enable participants to “attend” lectures by leading experts and ask questions afterward. The lectures, says Robert Ryder, professor of epidemiology and medicine at Yale, are targeted at public health and development officials and educators. For example, a talk about the Ebola virus in Zaire will cover how it is transmitted by monkeys and how ecological stresses such as deforestation contribute to the problem. The Emerging Infections Information Network can be found on the World Wide Web at <<http://www.med.yale.edu/EIINet>>. People can download the talks, available in audio, and accompanying slide presentations, between 4 and 5 p.m. EST on designated dates. Then from 6 to 7 p.m. they can join a “global chat room” for a real-time question and answer period—in writing—with the lecturer. The first seminar, a 6 February talk on the re-emergence of infectious diseases by Ruth L. Berkman of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, attracted “about 1500 hits,” says Ryder.

