

Tobacco Epidemic in China's Future

If current smoking patterns persist, tobacco will cause more than a third of all deaths among middle-aged Chinese men over the next few decades, report scientists in the 18 August issue of the *British Medical Journal*. If people don't stop smoking, it "will kill around 100 million [Chi-

nese] in the next 50 years," warns Tai Hing Lam, a professor of community medicine at the University of Hong Kong.

In China 20% of humankind (1.2 billion people) consume 30% of the world's cigarettes. While the peak in smoking-related deaths occurred in the mid-1970s in the West, the Chinese are about 40 years behind. But there has been little research on smoking's impact in China, and the belief persists that it is relatively harmless.

Following skepticism expressed by industry groups such as the Hong Kong Tobacco Institute over tobacco mortality data from the West, Lam set out to generate some

Asian data, looking at Hong Kong, which is predicted to be near the peak of its tobacco mortality following a consumption peak in the late 1970s. The team examined death records for 27,507 ethnic Chinese over 35 who died in 1998, as well as data on smoking habits of 13,054 surviving relatives. The researchers estimated that up to one-third of the deaths of male smokers aged 35 to 69 were attributable to smoking. If Chinese tobacco consumption, which lags about 20 years behind that of Hong Kong, continues on its present path, then the evidence is strong that this pattern of mortality will spread to China, says Lam. "It is clear that as Chinese smoke like Westerners, they will be killed by tobacco like Westerners."



Chinese men are smoking more than ever.

Celebs: Guard Your DNA

If human cloning ever takes off, a San Francisco firm warns that fans may take celebrity fixation a step too far, stealing VIP DNA in a bid to cook themselves up a drooling little Ricky Martin or pint-sized Madonna. So the company, The DNA Copyright Institute (DNACI), is offering a solution: Copyright your DNA.

"In the future it will be practically impossible to avoid being cloned by a determined individual," says DNACI founder Andre Crump, who set up shop last month. All the ardent fan need do is collect traces of sweat and skin left on telephones or wine glasses and take them to an unscrupulous lab for culturing.

Copyright protection could deter would-be DNA thieves, by offering legal recourse to victims, says Crump. For \$1500 DNACI plans to take

DNA samples from clients' inner cheeks and have genetic fingerprints ready in case legal action is called for. For an extra fee it will register the DNA with the U.S. Copyright Office. The procedure is available to anyone, but DNACI's major quarry are celebrities and other brilliant, talented people such as scientists. Crump says he's already had nibbles from some 30 potential customers and hopes to soon have his first genotype ready for copyright.

Whether that will work is not yet clear. DNACI's lawyer thinks that relevant precedents exist in the world of biotech patents, and a government official says, "anything you can print on paper is copyrightable." A spokesperson for the copyright office, however, says not quite: A person's DNA, he says, "is not an original work of authorship."

Basmati Patent Shrinks

A protracted legal battle over what India claims is a case of "biopiracy" of its famous basmati rice has been settled. On 14 August the U.S. patent office struck down most of the sweeping claims made in a patent taken by Texas-based RiceTec Inc.

Long-grained, aromatic basmati rice is an

important source of income for India, with exports last year bringing in \$500 million. So there was much uproar in the Indian Parliament in 1997 when RiceTec—which cultivates the rice in Texas under several names, including "Texmati"—won a patent encompassing a wide variety of rice lines and propagation methods. Indian groups and the government protested the patent, arguing that basmati cultivation is part of regional tradition—as indivisible from the Indo-Gangetic Plain as Champagne is from that region in France—and therefore not subject to an "umbrella" patent. India requested a "re-examination," saying grain traits listed in the patent, which potentially could bar India from exporting basmati to the U.S., already existed in Indian basmati strains.

Now, RiceTec has dropped all but five of its original 20 claims. Says Raghunath A. Mashelkar, director of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in New Delhi, "the objective for which India filed the reexamination case had been fulfilled."



Woman carries rice plants in basmati paddy.

For Mathematics, Abel = Nobel

Mathematicians have long groused about the lack of a Nobel Prize in math. The closest equivalent, the Fields Medal, is only awarded every 4 years, is restricted to the under-40 set, and comes with much less fanfare, not to mention cash.

Now they'll have a full-fledged annual Nobel-sized award, courtesy of the Norwegian government. Last month, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg announced the establishment of a 200 million kroner (\$22 million) fund for an "Abel Prize" in mathematics.

The fund marks the 200th birthday of Norway's famous mathematician Niels Henrik Abel, who died in poverty in 1829 at the age of 26. The prize will "create more ... awareness of mathematics ... as the lingua franca for all science," says University of Oslo mathematician Arnfinn Laudal. Worth about \$500,000, it will be awarded starting in 2003 by the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters. Predicts 1974 Fields Medal winner David Mumford, the new prize "will change the landscape of mathematics."



1929 Abel commemorative stamp.