edited by RICHARD STONE

University Breaks in Plagiarism Machine

Legal experts have eagerly awaited the first court test of a controversial "plagiarism detector" developed by NIH fraudbusters Ned Feder and Walter Stewart. As it turns out, however, the trial—originally scheduled for December 1991 but now delayed at least until next June—won't be a legal watershed: The plagiarism machine has already seen action at the University of Illinois.

C. Kristina Gunsalus, a misconduct policy officer at the University of Illinois, first revealed in *The New York Times* that Illinois officials have used the text-scanning computer program in plagiarism investigations. She told *Science* that she has used the program several times, both to confirm and to shoot down plagiarism allegations at her institution. "It's a really useful tool," she says. As a result of her experience, Gunsalus has agreed to testify as an expert witness in next June's court case. Why haven't other university officials tried the same tack? "As best as I can tell, I'm the only one in the known universe willing to be associated with their machine," Gunsalus says.

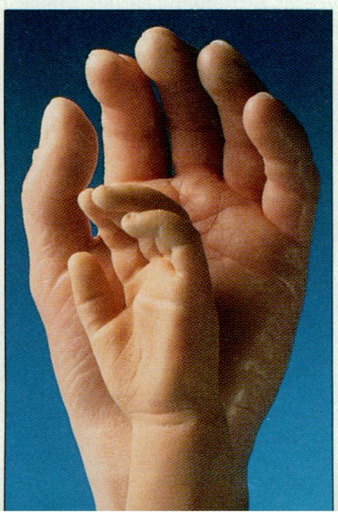
The court case arose when heirs to plastic surgeon John Marquise Converse claimed that publisher W.B. Saunders and Converse's former assistant editor Joseph McCarthy had copied whole sections of Converse's seven-volume plastic surgery textbook for a 1990 edition. Stewart, Feder, and their plagiarism machine got involved after an attorney for the Converse estate asked them to compare the original and revised texts (*Science*, 6 December 1991, p. 1448).

FDA Sees Green in Device Industry

Touted as the best way to speed new drugs to the market, congressionally mandated taxes on new drug applications called "user fees" have won the praise of the biotech and pharmaceutical industries, as well as the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). FDA officials are so enthusiastic, in fact, they're hinting that they intend to ask Congress to extend user fees to other products such as medical devices. But this plan may hit a snag, because the device industry says it's "adamantly" opposed to such fees.

Much depends on whether the promised changes in drug regulation actually occur. FDA officials are projecting a windfall from user fees and are already planning to hire 600 scientists to speed up the review of new drug applications (*Science*, 6 November, p. 886). They argue that this scheme should also work for devices. In 1991, it took FDA 21 months to review the average medical device application, 50% longer than in 1990. "If I'm a device manufacturer and I see [FDA's drug review centers] getting 600 people, I think that I'd recognize that this applies to other parts of the agency," says a top FDA official.

But the industry isn't buying FDA's argument. In a draft position letter, Alan H. Magazine, president of the Health Industry Manufacturers Association, writes that user fees won't solve "fundamental problems" at FDA. According to Magazine, review times for devices are on the rise for two reasons: FDA "frequently" changes approval requirements as devices are being reviewed, and in some cases the agency has imposed new requirements on clinical testing.



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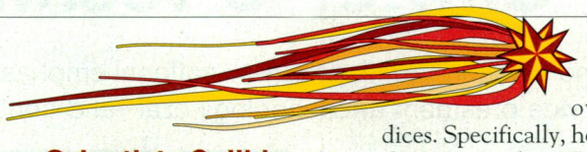
Hands off. Device makers warn FDA that taxes aren't the answer.



Scientists Collide on NASA Comet Report

A NASA committee that is supposed to recommend high-tech ways of protecting Earth from marauding comets and asteroids has now come under terrestrial attack—from one of its own members.

The assault comes from planetary scientist Clark Chapman of the Planetary Institute in Tucson, Arizona. In a recent memorandum to committee chairman John Rather, NASA associate director for space technology, Chapman calls an unpublished draft report of the committee "generally biased and technically flawed." Chapman is particularly irked by the "bizarre" schemes—including armadas of nuclear rockets and moon-based lasers—dreamed up to intercept an interplanetary interloper.

Chapman saves some of his harshest criticism for Rather, alleging that the report has been "deliberately distorted" to suit Rather's own prejudices. Specifically, he argues that the report echoes Rather's concerns over the dangers of small asteroids and comets. Meanwhile, Chapman and many others have suggested that scientists focus their attention on larger objects (at least a half-mile in diameter) that pose a greater threat to global climate and civilization.

Chapman suspects that nuclear weapons designers on the committee—looking for a post-cold war raison d'être—are exerting undue influence over the substance of the report. The reason, he says, is that smaller asteroids and comets might require more sophisticated weaponry to divert than larger objects. But instead of fighting Rather, Chapman insists in the memo that his name be struck from the report.

Rather failed to return phone calls from *Science*. But a NASA official told *Science* that the committee has no plans to alter its report—with the exception that it no longer bears Chapman's name.

Wyden to Seek More U.S. Research on RU-486

Soon after President-elect Bill Clinton takes office, he may be asked to make it easier for biomedical scientists to study RU-486, designed originally as an abortion-inducing drug. One congressman is particularly eager for the word. When the 103rd Congress convenes in January, Representative Ron Wyden (D–OR) plans to introduce a bill that would mandate the National Institutes of Health to conduct and support studies on RU-486 for more than three dozen other uses, including treatment of obesity, cancer, and depression.

RU-486, a drug that blocks progesterone receptors, is used in some European and Asian countries as an abortifacient and is being tested as a "morning-after" contraceptive. But the Bush Administration has opposed use of the drug, and in June 1989, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) placed RU-486 on its "import alert" list, which prohibits the drug's importation into the United States for personal use. The FDA does, however, allow its manufacturer, France-based Roussel-Uclaf, to supply U.S. scientists with the drug for research purposes.

But the chilly political climate toward RU-486 has made it difficult for scientists to obtain the drug for studies on humans. According to several researchers contacted by *Science*, Roussel-Uclaf has been hesitant to release the drug for human trials because its parent company, the German chemical giant Hoechst, fears a boycott of its other products instigated by anti-abortion activists. According to endocrinologist Charles Watlington of the Medical College of Virginia, the drug is so hard to get that he had to cut short a study that was looking at the effect of RU-486 on stress-mediated hormones.

Now Wyden's out to break the deadlock. And a staffer says that Wyden's got some encouraging signs from Clinton, who has said in stump speeches that he's interested in increasing RU-486's availability.