

RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Women's Health Advocate Moves to White House

Advocates for women's health research got a new, but not entirely welcome, champion in the White House last week: psychiatrist Susan Blumenthal, the controversial director of the Office for Women's Health at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Blumenthal has had a running battle with breast cancer advocates and this fall has caused a stir among a broader community of women's health researchers.

White House jobs are hard to come by these days, but the post for Blumenthal, who is the wife of Representative Edward Markey (D-MA) and a friend of the

Clintons, appears to have been created 2 weeks ago. Starting on 1 November, the White House says she will "contribute her medical expertise to the development of medical, scientific, and health initiatives and policy relating to women's health" as senior adviser to the president. It is not clear how her job relates to that of Audrey Tayse Haynes, who only 5 weeks ago was named head of the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach.

Blumenthal's appointment took many by surprise. "We certainly weren't consulted," says Fran Visco, president of the National Breast Cancer Coalition,

an influential lobby.

In fact, she says, "the people we normally talk to in the White House didn't know this was coming." And Visco's organization, which has claimed Blumenthal has been trying to build up her own office's functions at the expense of basic research, isn't happy. "I have expressed our outrage to the White House" over the appointment, she says.

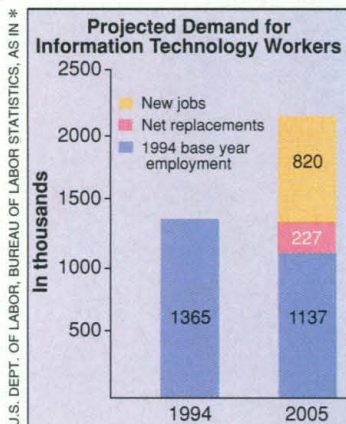
Blumenthal, who could not be reached for comment, has long been rumored to be heading out of HHS. The most recent flap involves a request for proposals



Kicked upstairs?
Susan Blumenthal.

she wrote this summer, describing contracts to be awarded to "centers of excellence" in women's health. Some applicants balked at language implying that Blumenthal would co-author five papers that each center would have to submit for publication. "The

language seemed to be saying that we would be blocked from publishing the results of our work in scientific journals" as original work, says one applicant who protested to HHS. An HHS spokesperson says "we're looking into it."



IT "Deficit"

Government, industry, and academia are teaming up to probe what they call "America's new deficit"—namely, information technology (IT) workers. At a press conference held last week in Washington, D.C., Education Secretary Richard W. Riley warned that the U.S. could "lose that [technological] edge" if it doesn't turn out more people with computer expertise. Senator John Warner (R-VA) is also worried: "I get up every morning and begin to think, 'What has the other half of the world achieved

while we've been asleep?'"

Speakers cited a new report by the U.S. Department of Commerce,* which claims that 190,000 jobs in computer science and engineering, computer programming, and systems analysis are going begging in the U.S., and that the number of positions will nearly double between 1994 and 2005. The report calls "upward pressure on salaries" evidence for a shortage—one survey showed systems analysts' wages going up 15% from 1996 to 1997. The report says the future doesn't look any better in view of a 40% decline in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in computer science between 1986 and 1994.

However, not everyone agrees that the picture is this dire. "No, I don't think there's a shortage," says Norman Matloff, a professor of computer science at the University of California, Davis. He points to data from an annual survey by the Computing Research Association showing that enrollments in computer science rose 40% last year.

The new partnership, which includes AT&T and the University of California, Berkeley, is being organized by a trade group, the Information Technology As-

sociation of America, which issued its own report on "the IT workforce gap" last March.

Indian Rocket Falls Short

India's space triumph last week—launching a 1200-kilogram satellite with its own Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle—quickly lost some luster when scientists discovered the next day that a fuel leak had occurred in the rocket, leaving it with only enough thrust to place the satellite, a remote-sensing instrument called IRS 1D, in an elliptical orbit ranging from 300 to 820 kilometers above Earth.

Boosting it into its designated circular orbit of 817 km would take so much of the satellite's own fuel that it could drastically shorten its planned 3-year lifespan. So instead, the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) plans to maneuver the satellite into a lower orbit of 550 km. "Under no circumstances will the life of the satellite be compromised," says a spokesperson for ISRO.

India had hoped that the launch would propel it into the ranks of countries with the ability to hoist large satellites into a polar, sun-synchronous orbit, a

necessary step toward achieving the geosynchronous orbits used by commercial telecommunications satellites. But official preening after the 29 September launch from the Bay of Bengal quickly turned to chagrin with news of the faulty orbit.

Space scientists still expect some benefits from the satellite, whose cameras have a resolution of 5.8 meters, the finest of any civilian satellite now in orbit, which will be used for mapping and monitoring the environment. Indian space officials are also still hoping that the rocket, which cost \$13 million, will make ISRO an attractive option to ferry low-Earth orbit satellites in the ever more lucrative commercial space market.

Rush to Excavate Montana Dino

When University of Notre Dame paleontologist Keith Rigby found what may be the remains of the largest meat-eating dinosaur ever in Montana in July, he hoped to keep it a secret until after he'd had time to do some excavation. But last month the cat got out of the bag when former landowners were caught poking around with a

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*America's New Deficit: The Shortage of Information Technology Workers. To get a copy call 202-482-5687.

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tractor. The result, for Rigby, is fewer bones, but more resources to work with.

After a dispute during which it turned out that the land was federally owned and not private property, federal officials took over the site. Rigby obtained a federal permit and hastened back to the now highly publicized location. But when he reopened it, he found that about two-thirds of the left side of the refrigerator-sized skull was missing. Fortunately, some of it has been returned. Rigby says that two pieces of jawbone, delivered to the FBI on 19 September by persons unidentified, fit his beast.

The 66-million-year-old fossil, discovered with the aid of volunteers from the Earthwatch Institute in Watertown, Massachusetts, may be the largest dinosaur yet found anywhere. The pubis bone measured 135 centimeters across, 10 cm larger than the largest known *Tyrannosaurus rex*. The true test of size, however, is in the femurs, or thighbones, which have not yet been uncovered.

The unsolicited public attention has brought forth both financial contributions and volunteers. New workers "get added daily," says Peter Tyson of Earthwatch, which has funded Rigby

for 10 years, with local volunteers swelling the ranks. The latest excavating has uncovered much of the snout and right side of the upper jaw, including eight serrated teeth. And between the ribs appears to be the dino's last meal—bite-size bone fragments of a smaller dinosaur. Rigby wants to finish digging this month so the fossils can be safely stored for the winter.

Odd Visitor From the Oort Cloud

A 10-kilometer object that looks like an asteroid may have come from the Oort cloud, a spherical

Study Finds Students Like a Good Show

An enthusiastic teaching style is more important to students than what's taught, according to a recent study at Cornell University. The authors say the study casts doubt on the validity of the now-standard practice of using student evaluations to help schools make decisions about tenure and promotion.

"Student ratings are far from the bias-free indicators of instructor effectiveness and quality that many have touted them to be," conclude psychologists Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci in the September issue of *Change*. In the Cornell study, Ceci taught exactly the same course on developmental psychology to two very similar classes, totaling 472 students, in fall and spring semesters. The only difference was that the second time around he lectured with more enthusiasm, varying his vocal pitch and using more hand gestures.



Teachers' role model? Students think they learn more from an expressive professor.

But that stylistic difference had a profound impact on student ratings. Given an average rating in the first course, Ceci was praised by the second group for his knowledge, accessibility, and even the quality of the textbook. The authors say they were struck by the magnitude of the effect. For example, when students were asked, "How much did you learn in this course?" the average response leapt from 2.93 to 4.05 on a 5-point scale. The authors call this difference "staggering"—especially since the final grades given in the two semesters were "virtually identical."

Anthony Greenwald, a psychologist at the University of Washington, Seattle, says the study fits in with his own research showing that high grades influence student ratings. "It serves as a healthy reminder that evaluations are sensitive to things other than the amount that students learn," he says.

EDDIE MURPHY IN THE NUTTY PROFESSOR, UNIVERSAL/BRUCE MCBROOM

shell of frozen bodies far beyond Pluto's orbit where only comets are thought to lurk.

The finding, based on computer simulations to be published in the 20 October *Astrophysical Journal*, could have implications for the tumultuous birth of the solar system—providing the first evidence that material was flung out into the Oort cloud not just from the icy region of Uranus and Neptune, but also from rocky areas much closer to the sun.

The object in question, called 1996 PW, is traveling through the outer solar system in an elon-

gated elliptical orbit typical of comets, which are basically dirty snowballs. But it lacks a comet's gaseous emissions or dusty coma. To learn more, Paul Weissman of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California—the object's discoverer—and Harold Levison of the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado, ran simulations of how 1996 PW's orbit might have evolved. They deduced that it used to be a much larger orbit that extended to the Oort cloud. They also concluded that the object has only orbited the sun 27 times, far short of the 800 trips of known inert comets, which suggests that it's an asteroid and not a comet that has lost water from many solar flybys. From estimates of how much rocky material might have been thrown out of the early solar nebula, the pair goes on to guess that about 1% of Oort cloud's inhabitants are rocky asteroids.

Brian Marsden of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics in Cambridge, Massachusetts, says he's not completely convinced that the object is not an inert comet. But he agrees that it is "unlikely to have the sort of orbit it does unless it had been in the Oort cloud at some point."

Rabbit Virus Vectors Named

Researchers have discovered that insects—especially bush flies and blowflies—are the primary cause of the rapid, long-distance spread of rabbit hemorrhagic disease (RHD), the virus decimating Australia's feral rabbit population. The government began deliberate release of the virus 2 years ago after it escaped confinement during a government-sponsored trial—before scientists had figured out just how it spread.

"We've always been mystified at how the disease spread so fast and so completely in arid, lightly populated areas," says Brian Cooke, principal ecologist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization. In some dry regions it has killed off 95% of the population; elsewhere, fatality rates are closer to 65%.

At a 23 September seminar on RHD held in Adelaide, scientists reported that of 10 insects now identified as disease vectors, common

bushflies, brown and green blowflies, and rabbit fleas are the main ones in arid areas. The flies can be carried long distances by winds, says Peter Janssens, deputy director of the Vertebrate Biocontrol Centre in Canberra. That explains how "the virus would hit one area hard ... then pop up in another place virtually overnight." It also clears up the mystery of how the virus escaped from the island test site.

As RHD continues to rage unabated, some fear that the rabbits' predators will switch to endangered native wildlife. But so far, it appears that predator populations have declined and survivors are seeking other food such as insects and carrion. But there has been one undesirable result, says environmental scientist Rob Morrison from Flinders University: As the country's endangered wedge-tailed eagles are forced to eat road kill instead of rabbits, more eagles are being hit by cars.