

Science Briefs

Boston hospital suspends trials

BOSTON (AP) — A Boston medical center has suspended its gene therapy tests because of safety concerns arising from a student's death last year in a similar trial program in Pennsylvania.

"We are temporarily halting (the trial) because there is a national discourse on this, and we would like to benefit from it," Dr. Michael Rosenblatt, interim president of Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, said.

The death in September of the 18-year-old patient in Pennsylvania triggered a government investigation, the suspension of eight gene therapy trials in that state and a Senate hearing last week.

In halting their program last week, Beth Israel officials said they had encountered no problems with it.

The trial involved implanting genetically altered cells into patients with hemophilia, an inherited bleeding disorder.

Last summer, Beth Israel halted a different gene therapy trial after three of the first six terminally ill cancer patients died.

Officials at the hospital said an internal review concluded that at least two of the deaths were not related to the treatment.

Gene therapy attempts to repair or replace broken genes in seriously ill patients by transferring normal genes into the body.

Study says brain needs stimulation

DALLAS (AP) — You better keep those brain cells from getting bored, otherwise they might kill themselves, according to a new study.

The findings point out how important it is for nerve cells in an

embryonic brain to keep transmitting signals to neighboring cells in the brain. If they don't, then the non-active cells actually engage in a mass suicide, according to Thomas Sudhof of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

"If we can figure out how neurons die, we can think about how to prevent that," Dr. Sudhof told *The Dallas Morning News*.

Nerve cells transmit signals mainly by feeding neighboring nerve cells a batch of messenger chemicals called neurotransmitters.

There are many types of messenger chemicals, including serotonin, which directly affect those the parts of the brain which trigger depression.

In the new study, Dr. Sudhof and a crew of other researchers studied mice brains that were no longer being fed the messenger chemicals as they were being developed in the womb of another mouse.

The mice's brains developed normally up to a point, then nerve cells in the brain engaged in a mass suicide so severe that the developing brain shrinks.

The developing spinal cord actually disappeared and the mice die at birth. Their findings appear in the latest issue of the journal *Science*.

Astronauts return for 2nd attempt

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) —

Astronauts returned to the Kennedy Space Center on Monday for their second attempt at lifting off on an Earth-mapping mission.

"We're real glad to be back," said space shuttle Endeavour's commander, Kevin Kregel, flanked by his five crew members.

"The weather looks like it's going to be favorable for a launch attempt on Friday.

The ants go marching ...

Texas researchers introduce natural enemies for ant control

BY SCOTT JENKINS
The Battalion

Some ships steaming into the Gulf of Mexico from South America in the 1930s brought more than exotic produce.

Soil shoveled by the ton into South American ships for ballast also carried populations of red fire ants — unwitting immigrants to the southern United States.

The ants, non-native to the U.S., became a future menace to U.S. ecosystems.

But some scientists say that carefully introducing natural enemies of the imported red fire ant into the Texas ecosystem could help control the species.

Research on so-called biological control of the ant make up several of the 35 projects underway as part of the Texas Fire Ant Research and Management Plan, directed by Dr. Bart Drees of the Texas A&M Department of Entomology.

The imported red fire ant spread into large chunks of many southeastern states after arriving as an unwanted stowaway.

In addition to disrupting the ecology of the region, the red fire ant is a danger to humans and livestock and a cause of damage to landscape and electrical equipment.

Efforts at controlling the ants have been expensive and largely unsuccessful.

The introduction of the ants to this area was a "huge ecological disaster," Drees said.

The lack of natural enemies in the U.S. is thought to be an important factor in allowing the red imported fire ant to spread quickly, displacing native species.

In South America, several natural enemies keep the fire ant populations in check.

Some of these — including a fly whose larvae are parasites to

the ant, and a strain of fungus whose spores grow on the ants' bodies — are being looked at as candidates for introduction into the local ecosystem as a sustainable solution to mitigate the fire ant problem.

"We are trying to re-establish the balance of nature," Drees said. He cautioned that the research is aimed at control, not eradication.

It is thought that biological control of the insects could be a self-sustaining way to control the fire ant population and eliminate the need for insecticides and other measures that could have a greater impact on the environment.

"[Bio-controls] are self-generating and usually rather specific, so they can be gentler on native species," said Dr. Bradleigh

Vinson, professor of entomology.

Biological control of insects is not without hazards.

"The challenge for researchers is to ensure that the newly introduced species do not become problems themselves," Drees said.

Several institutions from across the state are participating in the plan including Texas A&M, University of Texas and Texas Tech University.

At A&M, Vinson and his group are investigating a microscopic protozoan called *Thelohania solenopsae* that infects red fire ants and shortens their life span.

Over a period of months, an

infected colony will decline dramatically.

"*Thelohania* has great potential if we can learn how to produce it in large amounts," Vinson said.



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