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criticism by the German Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat).

However, with the agreement of the Science Ministry of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Witten/Herdecke University (UWH), based near Dortmund and Bochum, will accept new medical students in summer 2006 despite the council's recent recommendation to stop accreditation of new students next year. Although there are now other private universities in Germany, UWH is the only one which has a medical faculty.

In July 2005, the science council had accredited all five faculties of UWH as academic institutions, but had pointed out that the medical faculty had severe deficits and should either reform or close down (www.wissenschaftsrat.de).

"The main problem is the lack of almost any research activities," said Karl Max Einhäupl, president of the council. Furthermore, exam results are below national standard and the number of student dropouts is high, at 40%, he said.

In a press conference last week the president of the university, Wolfgang Glatthaar, said that the medical curriculum will be revised in due course and that research will be strengthened, for instance in collaboration with a major hospital in Cologne (Köln-Merheim).

Annette Tuffis *Heidelberg*

Foreign visitors to India are unaware of rabies risk

Foreigners visiting India need to be sensitised to the persistence of rabies as a serious public health problem in India, doctors said last week. A British woman died last Saturday of rabies contracted during a trip to Goa earlier this year.

The 39 year old woman from Bury, Greater Manchester, had been bitten by a dog in Goa and became unwell after her return to the United Kingdom. She was diagnosed with rabies and had treatment at the Walton Centre for Neurology in Liverpool.

"There are clear guidelines from the World Health Organization that European and North

American travellers to the Indian subcontinent take pre-exposure vaccinations against rabies," said Shampur Madhusudana, a virologist at the Indian National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences.

A community survey two years ago by the Association for the Prevention and Control of Rabies, which covers 21 towns across India, showed that 20 000 people in the country die from rabies each year out of eight million who are bitten by dogs.

India's efforts to eliminate stray dogs received a setback four years ago when animal rights activists influenced the government to pass the Animal Birth Control Rules, which prohibit municipal authorities from killing stray animals.

Ganapati Mudur *New Delhi*

Stem cell bill may be stalled in US Senate

Action on the bill to increase funding for embryonic stem cell research and to expand the number of embryonic stem cell lines available seemed to have stalled with just days left before the US Senate began its August vacation. The House of Representatives passed the bill in May, challenging George Bush, who has limited federal funding to the 22 stem cell lines in existence on 9 August 2001.

The bill, now awaiting a Senate vote before, normally, being signed into law by the president, would fund research on thousands of frozen embryos left over after fertility treatment and voluntarily donated by couples (*BMJ* 2005;330:1285).

President Bush has said that he would veto the bill, which can only be over-riden by a two thirds vote in both houses.

The Senate majority leader, Republican Bill Frist, has not yet brought the bill to the Senate floor for a vote. Six other stem cell bills are waiting for a Senate vote, many of which suggest ways of creating embryonic stem cells that would not destroy early human embryos, such as extracting stem cells from embryos that have stopped developing.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Science committee calls for better research into ageing

Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

More government funding and better coordination of research into ageing are urged in a report from the UK House of Lords. More must be done to make older people healthier and to improve their quality of life, said the select committee on science and technology in *Ageing: Scientific Aspects*.

"At a time when people are living longer, their last years should be years of good health and active engagement in society. Instead, older people believe their last years are increasingly a time of ill health and isolation," said Lord Sutherland, chair of the inquiry.

On spending, the report said that comparatively little is being invested by the Medical Research Council into ageing related research and virtually nothing by the Economic and Social Research Council, which the report said should urgently and substantially increase the proportion of its funding.

The report said that bodies currently responsible for the co-

ordination of ageing related research in the United Kingdom are not doing the job and describes attempts at coordination as woefully inadequate: "The image we have is of a series of ill thought out initiatives which have long titles, short lives, vague terms of reference, little infrastructure, and no sense of purpose. A radical reorganisation is essential."

It also urged the government and the NHS to do more to combat ageism and wants the Department of Health to make sure that older people are not routinely excluded from clinical trials.

The report was welcomed by agencies involved with elderly people. "A positive response from the government is now needed to buck its trend for inadequate investment on research into ageing," said Lorna Layward, research manager for Research into Ageing. □

Ageing: Scientific Aspects is available at www.parliament.uk/hlscience.



Aid agencies appeal for help against famine

About eight million people are currently facing the risk of dying from starvation in one of the worst food crises to hit Africa in recent times, according to aid agencies.

The famine follows severe drought and locust swarms, which plagued the area last year, devastating crops and livestock.

Most of the worst affected communities are in Niger, where cereal production dropped by more than 180 000 tonnes. Other countries affected include Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania.

The African Union and several aid agencies are responding to the appeal for aid. The African Union has provided \$1m (£0.58m; €0.83m) in emergency aid while calling for more aid. In addition, the UK charity Oxfam and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have launched appeals for £1m and SFr18m (£8m; \$14m; €12m), respectively, to help strengthen current efforts in the affected areas.

Chibuzo Odigwe *Calabar, Nigeria*