

Chicken Raised in a Dish

Research prizes are all the rage, but a new one is sure to raise eyebrows if not gorges: \$1 million for getting “in vitro” (IV) meat onto supermarket shelves. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) announced the money pot last week, acknowledging on its Web site that although it would prefer that consumers stick to vegetables, “many people continue to refuse to kick their meat addictions.” IV meat, the thinking goes, would at least save a lot of animals.

So far, a few scientists have been trying to get cells from pigs and other animals to grow in the lab. But big challenges remain, such as finding the optimal culture conditions. Last month, the first international IV meat symposium was held in Norway.

PETA is asking contestants to submit IV chicken samples by June 2012 to its panel of 10 judges; entrants must also be able to mass-produce the meat. Although \$1 million is a nice bonus, “the real prize would be the global meat market, which is worth hundreds of billions of dollars annually,” assuming consumers are willing to eat the stuff, says Jason Matheny, founder of New Harvest, a nonprofit that promotes substitute meat.

Bird and Mammal Make a Couple

Researchers have witnessed a wild Antarctic fur seal attempting sex with a king penguin—the first documented case of a pinniped trying to mate with an animal that is not only a different species but also a different class of vertebrates.

P. J. Nico de Bruyn and colleagues at the University of Pretoria in South Africa saw the 45-minute attack at a beach on Marion Island in the southern Indian Ocean. “The seal alternated between resting on the penguin and bouts of pelvic thrusting copulatory behavior,” the team writes in the *May Journal of Ethology*. Burney Le Boeuf, a behavioral ecologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, says he’s not surprised, given the male propensity to father as



EARLY OILS

Buddhist artists in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, may have painted with oils centuries before European Renaissance painters developed the technique.

A team led by Marine Cotte at the European Synchrotron Radiation Facility in Grenoble, France, has analyzed tiny samples of paintings sent by a UNESCO conservation team from a site where the Taliban destroyed two giant Buddha statues in 2001. Initial scans with ultraviolet light led researchers to suspect the presence of oil, and “we have confirmed it,” says Cotte. Twelve of 50 murals depicting colorful Buddhas and mythical creatures, painted in caves behind the statue niches, included pigments bound in plant oils. Oil offers “more freedom” to artists, says Cotte, as it doesn’t set instantly like the gypsum or calcium salt pigments also used in the caves.

Helen Howard of the National Gallery in London says European oil paintings date back to the 12th century, but whether oil was used earlier isn’t known because “analysis hasn’t often been carried out on very early paintings.” UNESCO team leader Yoko Taniguchi of the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties in Tokyo said in a statement that ancient Romans and Egyptians were known to use drying oils, but only as medicines and cosmetics. Thus, the team writes in April’s *Journal of Analytical Atomic Spectrometry*, the Afghan samples could be the “oldest example of oil paintings on Earth.”

many offspring as possible: “Sperm are cheap.” Le Boeuf says he’s reminded of male wild turkeys, which will attempt to mate with a stick if it’s placed at an angle that mimics the neck of a receptive female.

Glyphs for Docs

Physicians may be losing their attention spans along with the rest of us, but French researchers have come up with a remedy: pictographs to give doctors shortcuts to information that will help them write better prescriptions.

Jean-Baptiste Lamy, a bioinformatics expert at the University of Paris, and colleagues call their new language VCM for *visualisation des connaissances médicales*. Use of the system will avoid a lot of common prescribing

errors, they argue, as doctors often don’t have time to read drug monographs when making medical decisions. “A VCM-based software can help [a physician] verify that a drug can be prescribed to the patient without contraindication,” says Lamy. “It has been shown that this step is sometimes skipped due to the lack of time.”

In the current issue of the journal *BMC Medical Informatics and Decision Making*, the authors report that they successfully trained



11 general practitioners in their system of icons that represent symptoms, diseases, drugs, and

tests, and can be combined for more complex meanings. The symbols above, for example, substitute for “The hypokalemia caused by this drug increases the cardiac toxicity of digitalis glycosides and the risk of heart rhythm disorders.”