



Pioneers

INDEPENDENT. Blind since birth, chemistry graduate student Cary Supalo received help from six people for his master's project on inorganic catalysts at Pennsylvania State University in State College. All those hands "added a plethora of variables" that led to less-than-impressive results, says Supalo, who is now developing tools to help other blind students avoid that experience.

Software developed by Supalo and his colleagues enables laboratory probes—instruments that record data on everything from temperature to pH to reaction color—to communicate with PC-based text-to-speech software. Last year, one area high school student used the tools to earn a 5-out-of-5 score on the lab-intensive Advanced Placement chemistry exam, says Supalo. "Some level of sighted assistance will always be necessary" for blind students, he says, "but our goal is to minimize it."

SIDELINES

IN HARMONY. Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization, apparently thinks that singing is good for health. Last month, Chan burst out singing a classic tune from the 1951 musical, *The King and I*, during a particularly long and tense meeting about the sharing of influenza viruses in Geneva, Switzerland.



"It's a nice way to reduce the tension," says her spokesperson, Christine McNabb, and not the first time Chan has entertained health officials. "It warms up the room." Chan's performance of "Getting to Know You" wasn't bad, either, says Edward Hammond of the Austin, Texas-based Sunshine Project, who attended

the flu meeting. But he felt sorry for the interpreters, who had to translate lines like "You are precisely my cup of tea."

MOVERS

BUILDING BRIDGES. The main government funder of basic research in the United Kingdom has opened an office in Washington, D.C. The Research Councils UK—an umbrella for seven agencies that oversee \$5.8 billion in science funding—opened a similar office in Beijing earlier this year.

Helen Thorne, an environmental biologist, will head the U.S. office. The councils are already supporting an \$8 million program to foster U.S.-U.K. collaboration, including a joint University of Texas-Imperial College London cancer research program, and hope to recruit U.S. scientists for a new multidisciplinary research program on global security. "We hope that by being here on the ground, we can tap new potential," says Thorne.



THE EXTRA MILE >>

MITIGATING DISASTER. As a young civil engineer, Hassan Mashriqui could only stand by and watch as a 1991 cyclone killed 138,000 people in his native Bangladesh. But last month, as Cyclone Sidr roiled the Bay of Bengal, Mashriqui used his skills as a researcher at Louisiana State University (LSU) in Baton Rouge to help mitigate its impact.



Mashriqui studies how hurricanes blow water onto the shore and has adapted his model for Bangladesh. So on 13 November, just 2 days before Sidr made landfall, Mashriqui requested super-



computer time to run the model, which predicted storm surges as high as 3.7 meters. "We had to act fast," he says.

Mashriqui e-mailed the results to an official at the Bangladesh Ministry of Food and Disaster Management whose son is an LSU student. Evacuations of

low-lying areas were already under way, but the predictions helped the government target its preparations for relief efforts. "They could see in detail where the storm was coming and what the surge would be," he says.

The cyclone still claimed more than 4000 lives. Mashriqui hopes that Bangladeshi researchers will be able to run the model themselves the next time a cyclone threatens their country.

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