

Futures



The galaxy's rough downtown

The best view yet of our galaxy's center should make us thankful we live out in its quiet suburbs. In a swath just a few hundred light-years across, the orbiting Chandra observatory picked out hundreds of powerful X-ray beacons, shining in a fog of 10 mil-

lion-degree gas. Many may be neutron stars and black holes, left by explosions of short-lived, massive stars, common in the heart of the galaxy. These super-dense cinders blaze with X-rays as they suck in material torn from other stars. We are not entirely sheltered from

the turmoil, Daniel Wang of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst said last week at the American Astronomical Society's meeting in Washington, D.C. His team also sees evidence that the hot gas "escapes into the galactic suburbs including our own neighborhood," carrying elements like carbon and oxygen, vital to the origins of life. *-Tim Appenzeller*

SCIENCE TV

Inquiring minds

Imagine science fair projects that are fun instead of a chore—and give winning students TV coverage. That's the premise of *DragonflyTV*, PBS's smart new science-for-kids series. Aimed at ages 9 to 12, the half-hour program stars kids who research questions about how the world works. What does rock size tell you about river rapids? Does the position of the foot affect the power of a tae kwon do kick? (To learn the answers, tune in when the weekly 13-part series premieres the weekend of January 19-20.) Adult scientists drop



A friendly dolphin on *DragonflyTV*

by, too. Paleontologist Gary Takeuchi explains how to protect fossils with a "field jacket" of burlap and plaster. Budding brainiacs can submit their own investigations. *-Marc Silver*

BIOTECH

Stemming a worry

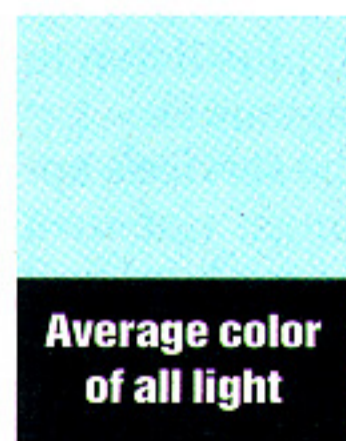
The 800-pound gorilla of stem-cell research just shed a few pounds. Biotech company Geron last week ceded some of the exclusive rights it had claimed over commercial uses of human embryonic stem cells back to the patent-holder, Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation. The company now holds sole rights over only three tissues derived from stem cells—neural, heart, and pancreatic islet cells. The company and WARF also agreed to license the cells free for non-commercial research. The settlement "certainly opens up the field," says University of Pennsylvania Law School's Arti Rai. But biotech patent attorney Matthew Vincent notes that

"the three tissues left to Geron happen to be some of the most therapeutically significant." *-Rachel K. Sobel*

STAR LIGHT, STAR BRIGHT

Cosmic turquoise

What would the universe look like, wondered two Johns Hopkins University astronomers, if the light from trillions of stars—yellow, red, blue—was mooshed together into a composite color? Karl Glazebrook and Ivan Baldry did the mooshing for fun, but the data came from a serious study of more than 200,000 galaxies, the 2dF Galaxy Redshift Survey. Blue stars are hot and young; red stars are older, so galactic color balance reveals how fast new stars are forming. Oh, yes—the color of the cosmos? Revealed to the American Astronomical Society last week, it's pale turquoise. *-Avery Comarow*



GENES AND DIET

Sour on milk

Thousands of years ago, humans could not digest lactose, the sugar in milk, once they were weaned. A genetic mutation changed that for northern Europeans and others who depended heavily on dairy products. But in much of the world's population, including 30 million to 50 million Americans, lactose can cause cramps, nausea, and diarrhea. Now researchers have found the DNA variant responsible. The discovery, in this week's *Nature Genetics*, could mean a genetic test for lactose intolerance may not be far behind. But some doctors note that accurate tests already exist, and just because you have the intolerance gene doesn't mean you can't drink milk. Bacteria in the colon sometimes adapt to tolerate the lactose. *-Dana Hawkins*