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The Times

January 13, 2007

### Body&Soul

## Breakthroughs, tips and trends

JOHN NAISH

### Operation Alarm

IT'S A frightening thought, but crucial nerves are hard for surgeons to see and thus easy to cut by mistake.

Now German scientists are developing an alarm system remarkably like the child's electronic game, Operation: it listens to individual nerves and goes off if an accident is about to occur.

Nerves strongly resemble minor blood vessels and connective tissue. Cutting them accidentally can bring severe consequences. In the case of the nerve serving vocal cords, damage during thyroid gland surgery can lead to voice loss and chronic hoarseness.

Until the operation is over, it is often not possible to tell if any damage has been caused. But a team of German scientists, led by the Fraunhofer Institute for Biomedical Engineering, has developed new electrodes that effectively turn parts of the human nervous system into a security-alarm circuit.

The electrodes are only 10 micrometres (0.01mm) thick and snuggle up to their target nerve so closely that they can pick out its signals from the electrical noise of surrounding cells.

If the electrodes detect signals that indicate the nerve is being pressured by a blade, the system sets off an alarm buzzer.

Already a pilot project shows that the system can work during thyroid surgery and the team hopes to extend it to more complex areas of the nervous system.

### Olé for olive oil

OLIVE POMACE, a waxy paste left after virgin and extra-virgin oils have been pressed from olives, could have a life-saving use — fighting HIV.

Chemists at the University of Granada, in Spain, say that maslinic acid, a compound found in the pulped skins, seems to inhibit HIV's ability to spread from an infected cell to the rest of the body.

Spain has a good deal of olive pulp left lying around from the oil-extraction process and the researchers have been seeking medical uses for it, with evident success.

They have already reported in the *Journal of Nutrition* that olive-skin byproducts contain extracts that can inhibit the spread of human colon cancer cells. The investigators have also taken ten patents on their ability to fight parasites that cause diarrhoea.

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