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WASHINGTON, Feb. 6

ESA spacecraft provides 3-D images of Mars

BERLIN, Feb. 6 The European Space Agency said a three-dimensional picture of Mars is available on the Internet, thanks to data from its Mars Express spacecraft.

A new high-resolution Digital Terrain Model data set just released will allow researchers to obtain new information about Mars in 3-D, ESA said.

Digital Terrain Models, or DTMs, allow scientists to "stand" on planetary surfaces. Although ordinary images can provide spectacular views, they do not convey topographical information.

The high resolution stereo camera aboard the spacecraft was designed to provide such 3-D information.

"Understanding the topography of Mars is essential to understanding its geology," said Professor Gerhard Neukum of Germany's Freie University, the study's principal investigator.

The DTM can instantly tell researchers the slope of hillsides or the height of cliffs, the altitude and slope of lava flows or desert plains.

A special Web site provides the general public to visualize the data online at <http://hrscview.fu-berlin.de>.

Gene's role identified in brain cancer

BOSTON, Feb. 6 U.S. medical scientists have identified a gene that either fights the development of the brain cancer tumor glioblastoma or helps the tumor advance.

Researchers led by Associate Professor Azad Bonni of the Harvard Medical School said scientists have long assumed the gene, STAT3, only acts as a tumor inducer, and have been developing therapeutics that inhibit STAT3.

But the study's findings that the gene, depending upon the tumor's genetic makeup, might actually fight tumor growth means current therapies could do more harm than good in some cases. The findings, therefore, might change the way researchers approach not only glioblastoma, but other types of cancers as well. Bonni said.

"This discovery lays the foundation for a more tailored therapeutic intervention," said Bonni. "And that's really important. You can't just go blindly treating people by inhibiting STAT3."

The study, which included researchers at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, appears online in the journal Genes and Development and will be reported in the journal's Feb. 15 print issue.

Earth's temperature linked to earthquakes

GRANADA, Spain, Feb. 6 Spanish scientists have linked the temperature of the Earth's crust to the planet's seismic activity.

The researchers from the University of Granada and the Andalusian Institute for Earth Sciences also determined African and European tectonic plates move about 4 millimeters closer each year, creating small, continuous earthquakes in the Gibraltar Arc area -- a region of mountains that wraps around the northern, western and southern sides of the Alboran Sea.

The scientists said their findings characterize the physical and mechanical properties of the Earth's crust in the area, as well as determining the probability

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of earthquakes is significantly lower in areas of higher crust temperature.

The researchers also discovered the western area of the Sierra Nevada and Alhucemas -- all located within the Gibraltar Arc -- is the area in which most earthquakes occur due to low temperatures in the Earth's crust, while Spain and the eastern area of the Alboran Sea will most likely experience fewer seismic movements.

The research by Fermin Fernandez Ibanez, Juan Ignacio Soto Hermoso and Jose Molares Soto is reported in both the Journal of Geophysical Research and the journal Tectonics.

Proteins may protect against infections

BUFFALO, N.Y., Feb. 6 U.S. scientists said certain proteins appear to have the potential to enhance the production of antibodies against a multitude of infectious agents.

University of Buffalo Professor Terry Connell developed the LT-IIa and LT-IIb enterotoxins and their respective mutant proteins as mucosal adjuvants, or "boosters," that can enhance the potency of existing and future vaccines.

"Almost every bacterium and virus that attacks us doesn't bore through the skin," said Connell. "These infectious agents enter by colonizing the mucosal surfaces on the eye, sinuses, mouth, gut lining, lungs and genital tract."

The scientists used a mouse model to determine the nasal passage is the best mucosal surface on which to apply LT-IIa and LT-IIb. Mixing a very small amount of LT-IIa or LT-IIb with an existing antigen and dripping the mixture into a mouse's nose subsequently produced a strong antigen-specific immune response in the nasal passages, as well as in saliva, the urogenital tract and the bloodstream, their research showed.

In contrast, immunization with only the antigen generates a much lower level antigen-specific immune response.

Connell and colleagues published five papers last year describing their advances and might begin human trials in about a year.

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