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Could an Island of Béisbol Strike Out Lung Cancer?

Wired Magazine | Cuba has for several years had a promising therapeutic vaccine against lung cancer. The 55-year trade embargo led by the US made sure that Cuba was mostly where it stayed. Until—maybe—now.

The Obama administration has, of course, been trying to normalize relations with the island nation. And last month, during New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's visit to Havana, Roswell Park Cancer Institute finalized an agreement with Cuba's Center for Molecular Immunology (CIM) to develop a lung cancer vaccine and begin clinical trials in the US. Essentially, US researchers will bring the Cimavax vaccine stateside and get on track for approval by the Food and Drug Administration.

"The chance to evaluate a vaccine Cuba, continued on page 2

Life, Death and Pride in a Last-Resort ER

San Francisco Magazine | "Hey, Doctor Snowmobiles!" C.J., the Highland Hospital emergency room's "greeter-in-chief," sashays over and offers up one of the hundred hugs that she'll dispense to patients and staff today. As I move through the triage area and cross the threshold into the ER, I hear another four or five variations of my name called out: Snowman, Snowballs, Snooty, even Snoopy Dogg, a throwback to my Highland handle in the '90s. Those who stick with the more formal construct of Dr. Snoey are usually the newer staff—ex-military types or East Coasters for whom calling a colleague by a nickname runs too hard against the grain. The joke goes that the only person who calls me Dr. Snoey is my mother, and then only when I do something wrong.

To its core, the Highland ER is an informal place. Its staff feels more like family than like coworkers. We can be more ourselves here than anywhere else, in large part because those of us who Highland, continued on page 3

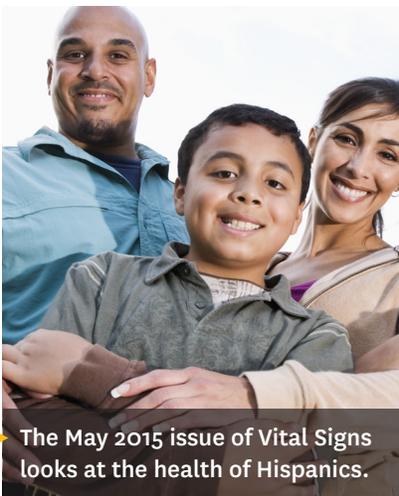
Video | Fukushima: Four Years Later

The Guardian |

The earthquake that rocked Japan on March 11, 2011 killed thousands and triggered a meltdown at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. Today, the cleanup continues, the countryside remains irradiated and a way of life has been lost forever.



CDC Vital Signs



The May 2015 issue of Vital Signs looks at the health of Hispanics.

48 Hours That Changed the Future of Rainforests

Grist | Glenn Hurowitz sat down for his Thanksgiving meal discouraged. He'd spent 2013 flying halfway around the world to cultivate a fragile relationship with Kuok Khoon Hong, CEO of the world's largest palm oil corporation, Wilmar. Kuok was the linchpin, Hurowitz believed—a single person who might turn the entire palm oil industry around. Wilmar buys Rainforests, continued on page 3

Party Advice for These Women: Chill (Their Eggs)

Los Angeles Times | If you peeked in on a recent party at the Viceroy Santa Monica, you might have noticed that the guests, almost all female, were chatting quietly, hesitantly, in pairs or trios. This wasn't a group of good friends—Prosecco and hors d'oeuvres aside.

The women were there to consider an investment: spending thousands of dollars to retrieve and freeze their eggs in case they need them one day to try to become a parent.

Egg-freezing parties — this one called On Ice — are a thing now. The idea is that not enough women are thinking about this procedure and are not thinking about it Eggs, continued on page 2

The Nightmare That Lurked Beneath Agriculture Street

Times-Picayune | After 22 years, Joan Davis finally received the letter. It arrived in January, informing her how much she would be getting under the terms of a class action lawsuit settlement filed against the city, the Housing Authority of New Orleans and the Orleans Parish School Board.

No matter the amount, Davis knew Nightmare, continued on page 3

Cuba spends a fraction of what the U.S. does on healthcare, yet the average Cuban has a life expectancy on par with the average American.



Cuba, continued

like this is a very exciting prospect,” says Candace Johnson, CEO of Roswell Park. She’s excited, most likely, because research on the vaccine so far shows that it has low toxicity, and it’s relatively cheap to produce and store. The Center for Molecular Immunology will give Roswell Park all of the documentation (how it’s produced, toxicity data, results from past trials) for an FDA drug application; Johnson says she hopes to get approval for testing Cimavax within six to eight months, and to start clinical trials in a year.

How did Cuba end up with a cutting edge immuno-oncology drug? Though the country is justly famous for cigars, rum, and baseball, it also has some of the best and most inventive biotech and medical research in the world. That’s especially notable for a country where the average worker earns \$20 a month.

Cuba spends a fraction of the money the US does on healthcare per individual; yet the average Cuban has a life expectancy on par with the average American. “They’ve had to do more with less,” says Johnson, “so they’ve had to be even more innovative with how they approach things. For over 40 years, they have had a preeminent immunology community.”

Despite decades of economic sanctions, Fidel and Raul Castro made

biotechnology and medical research, particularly preventative medicine, a priority. After the 1981 dengue fever outbreak struck nearly 350,000 Cubans, the government established the Biological Front, an effort to focus research efforts by various agencies toward specific goals. Its first major accomplishment was the successful (and unexpected) production of interferon, a protein that plays a role in human immune response. Since then, Cuban immunologists made several other vaccination breakthroughs, including their own vaccines for meningitis B and hepatitis B, and monoclonal antibodies for kidney transplants.

The thing about making such great cigars is, smoking is really, really bad for you. Lung cancer is the fourth-leading cause of the death in Cuba. Medical researchers at the Center for Molecular Immunology worked on Cimavax for 25 years before the Ministry of Health made it available to the public—for free—in 2011. Each shot costs the government about \$1. A Phase II trial from 2008 showed lung cancer patients who received the vaccine lived an average of four to six months longer than those who didn’t. That prompted Japan and some European countries to initiate Cimavax clinical trials as well.

Read the **story**, more about **lung cancer**, and the **CIM**. ■

Eggs, continued

soon enough. “Everyone who can afford to freeze their eggs should freeze their eggs. Women should take this seriously,” Dr. Vicken Sahakian said at the Viceroy hotel party. “The older you are, the more eggs you need. The older you are, the fewer eggs you produce.”

Egg freezing, or oocyte cryopreservation, is neither a sure thing nor cheap — running \$10,000 or more a cycle, not to mention hundreds of dollars a year in storage fees, and rarely covered by insurance or employers (Facebook and Apple being among the exceptions). And there is plenty of cultural debate over whether egg freezing takes advantage of women desperate to have a child or is a way to empower them.

But doctors and women who’ve done it call it insurance; women say it enables them to establish a career, travel or find the right partner before becoming a parent.

“It will be absolutely the greatest gift you can give yourself because it will give you the opportunity to create the family of your dreams, and you will never regret it,” Dr. Carrie Wambach said at the Viceroy, where there was a raffle for free medication needed for the process.

At the Viceroy, and at parties on other nights at Boa Steakhouse on the Sunset Strip and in the Beverly Wilshire hotel, doctors explain the procedure and answer the nervous questions: I’m 39 — or 37 or 35. Is it too late?

Read the **story**, more on egg freezing and other options, and get **information** about aging and its effects on fertility. ■



Who We Are

Hollywood, Health & Society, a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, is a free resource for entertainment writers working on storylines about health, health-care coverage and climate change. Funders have included the CDC, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Grantham Foundation, the Barr Foundation, The California Endowment, the Energy Foundation, ClimateWorks and the Skoll Global Threats Fund.

Highland, continued

have dedicated our careers to Highland have become defined by this place. After 25 years of working in its ER, I feel as if Highland is my hospital, but it is also a public hospital, an indigent care hospital, a safety net hospital. The qualifiers are both meaningful and prejudicial, reinforcing perceptions built upon decades of misunderstanding and distrust.

Highland and its patrons live on the other side of the tracks. It is the hospital of last recourse for those who have options and the one of first resort for those who have never known anything else. We see 270 patients per day, 100,000 per year: The institution is woven into the lives of tens of thousands of Oaklanders, as integral and quotidian as a trip to the post office or the grocery store. “I need to see the doctor” is never ambiguous in our community. It invariably means a visit to Highland.

When I tell people where I work, they usually respond with something like “It must be crazy there.” They envision a chaotic trauma ward teeming with drunks



Dr. Eric Snoey

and addicts and gunshot victims. Although this perception is inaccurate, I understand it. If you are shot or stabbed in or around Oakland, you are likely to be sent here. Oakland has the highest violent crime rate in the nation, so I have indeed seen my fair share of victims over my long career here.

Read the [story](#).

Nightmare, continued

it could never make her whole. But she hoped it would help to pay her rent and medical costs. And above all, she hoped it would send a message that the city was finally accepting responsibility for the nightmare that had been unleashed on the people who had made their homes atop the buried poisons in the Agriculture Street Landfill.

In the urban renewal drive of the 1960s and 1970s, the city and HANO built two communities in the 9th Ward—Press Park and Gordon Plaza—as part of an effort aimed at giving low-income families the chance to move out of the public housing projects and become first-time homebuyers. To many it seemed like a life-changing opportunity. The School Board even built a \$6 million elementary school in the heart of the neighborhood.

Davis, whose family was one of the first to move into the community, said she experienced a normal childhood in Press Park. She remembers shooting marbles and playing Double Dutch while her

mother spent hours in her garden, tending vegetables to feed her 13 children.

But there was something wrong with the land, she said. There was something in the soil that seemed to be making everyone sick. What the city and HANO failed to tell the residents and what the School Board failed to tell the families of Moton Elementary School is that just a few feet below the grass was 20 feet of compacted industrial waste riddled with 49 cancer-causing chemicals.

The federal government confirmed the danger in 1994 when it declared the communities a Superfund site, one of the most contaminated in the country.

The residents sued in Civil District Court, and in 2006 former Judge Nadine Ramsey ruled in their favor, ordering the city, the school board, HANO and four insurers of the housing authority, to pay them for emotional stress and property damage.

Read the [story](#), more about the [environmental impact](#) on health, and watch a [video](#) of a homeowner who tells what it's like to live in “the lost area.” ■

Rainforests, continued

palm oil from 80 percent of the world's suppliers. If Kuok committed to buying only from farmers who promised not to cut down the rainforest, it would set off a chain reaction that might save hundreds of species from extinction and squelch one of the world's biggest sources of carbon emissions. But after months of progress, the signals he'd been getting from Kuok were not encouraging.

Hurowitz emailed his co-workers at Forest Heroes, the nonprofit he'd founded, telling them to prepare for a protracted struggle.

“I said, ‘Suit up, we're going to war,’” Hurowitz told me. Then he got into bed, deflated. As he was settling in, his iPhone chimed a new text message. It was Scott Poynton, head of The Forest Trust, who had been working closely with Hurowitz and Kuok. Kuok was ready to make a commitment, the text said.

Hurowitz rushed to book a flight to Singapore. That Monday, he was on the airplane.

It takes 24 hours to fly from Washington, D.C., to Singapore. By the time Hurowitz got off the plane, he saw he had another email from Kuok. Perhaps the time was not right, the palm oil exec was saying now; he wasn't going to make any commitments unless the other palm oil companies did the same.

Hurowitz knew that wasn't going to happen. Negotiations had been proceeding for years and had consistently failed to stop the chainsaws. He fired back an email with a picture of protesters holding banners outside the Kellogg's headquarters in Battle Creek, Mich. (Kellogg's bought oil from Wilmar.)

Read the [story](#), and more about [carbon sinks](#) and the important role that [rainforests](#) play on Earth. ■

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