

NATIONAL news BRIEFS

CALIFORNIA

VaxGen Inc., a small California biotechnology company, has engineered the first HIV vaccine to win federal Food and Drug Administration approval for a large-scale trial involving humans, reports the *San Jose Mercury News*.



The vaccine, called AIDSVAX, uses a protein that helps bind the virus together. The treatment stimulates the immune system to produce antibodies that prevent HIV from attaching to receptors on the surface of cells, thereby eliminating the virus's means of reproduction.

The study, set to begin later this year, is expected to involve 7,500 healthy volunteers, cost \$20 million and take three years to complete. If successful, the vaccine will be available to the public in the early part of the next century, the newspaper said.

The U.S. Department of Justice filed civil lawsuits Jan. 19 aimed at shutting down six California marijuana distribution clubs for alleged violations of federal drug laws.

According to Reuters, the maneuver marks the latest legal skirmish to result from a 1996 popular vote allowing for the medical use of marijuana in California.

The lawsuits maintain that cultivation, distribution and/or possession of the drug violate federal law, and that laws passed by states do not override federal law.

Marijuana advocates have vowed to fight the lawsuits.

Legislation that would have forced government contractors to provide equal benefits to employees with domestic partners was killed by a 2-4 vote in a state Senate committee on Jan. 14, reports The Associated Press.

Defeat of the bill, proposed by Sen. Tom Hayden (D-Los Angeles) and modeled after San Francisco's policy, was attributed to a lack of support from the Judiciary Committee's Democratic members, three of whom are likely to face tough re-election campaigns.

COLORADO

A student group that supports gay and lesbian rights is suing Cherry Creek Public Schools for refusing to recognize it as an official club at Smoky Hill High School, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported on Jan. 23.

According to the lawsuit, school officials instead are recommending the organization become a support group led by a mental health professional who would involve members' parents and promote sexual abstinence.

Officials also reportedly refused to let the group put up posters using such terms as "Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom" and "To Thine Own Self Be True."

Homosexual-Heterosexual Alliance Reaching for Tolerance, known as HHART, filed the lawsuit in Denver U.S. District Court on Jan. 22.

HHART is "a gay-straight political and social alliance for the purposes of enhancing the education of the public, promoting tolerance for diversity, and providing social support for its members," the lawsuit said.

According to the newspaper, the suit says school officials have denied HHART privileges granted to other school clubs, including the right to announce meetings over the public address system and be included in the yearbook.

MISSOURI

The St. Louis School Board, reacting to the recommendations of a student health task force, changed the student conduct code to bar discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, says a Jan. 14 *Post-Dispatch* report.

Board member Bill Haas said, "It's a wonderful start."

NEBRASKA

In January, a district court ruled that three pieces from a gay art collection on display in an Omaha bar were obscene images that should be destroyed or removed, the *Omaha World Herald* reports.

Judge Michael Amdor said the works, which depict men engaging in oral sex and anal intercourse, have no artistic value and "clearly appeal to the prurient interest."



The decision, which found that 19 other paintings and sketches in the collection did not offend community standards, is the most recent development in a three-year-long controversy surrounding the art. The collection's owner, Terry Tippit, told reporters he plans to appeal the decision to the state Supreme Court.

TEXAS

Members have raised \$6.2 million to build a new cathedral in Dallas for what they call the largest lesbian and gay congregation in the world, United Press International reported on Jan. 19.

Members of the Cathedral of Hope also say they are launching a national campaign to raise another \$19 million to complete financing for the church being designed by architect Philip Johnson.

Johnson has designed a sanctuary that resembles a soaring iceberg 11 stories tall and two football fields long. Construction of the first phase, an office building, is expected to begin in May, with completion by January 2001.

VERMONT

Three same-sex couples seeking to get marriage licenses appealed Jan. 14 to Vermont's Supreme Court after their applications were rejected.

According to Reuters, in December a lower court judge dismissed the couples' case, ruling that there is no fundamental right to marry under the Vermont Constitution. The plaintiffs filed the suit after several town clerks declined to process their applications for marriage licenses.

Vermont Superior Court Judge Linda Levitt, in her opinion dismissing the lawsuit, said the state's discrimination could be justified by its interest in "furthering the link between procreation and child-rearing."

Vermont Attorney General William Sorrell is expected to argue against granting the licenses when the case is brought before the five Supreme Court justices later this spring.

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