

## IN BRIEF

**R. Kelly hit with 11 new sex crime charges**

**CHICAGO** Prosecutors on Thursday filed 11 felony sex crime charges against musician R. Kelly, in what his lawyer said was a refile of counts from an existing case. The 52-year-old already had been facing 10 charges, filed in February, for the alleged abuse of four women. He has denied the charges and claimed his accusers are lying. **AFP**

**Russia cuts gay scenes from Elton John biopic**

**MOSCOW** Gay sex scenes have been cut from the Russian version of Elton John biopic *Rocketman*, critics who saw a preview said on Friday, as the local distributor said it had made edits for legal reasons. Russia has a dire record on LGBT rights. **AFP**

**AI beats humans in multiplayer shooter**

**LONDON** A team of programmers at a British company, DeepMind, has designed automated "agents" that taught themselves how to play a first-person multiplayer video game shooter, and became so good they consistently beat human beings. **AFP**

**Vietnam culls 2 million pigs to fight swine fever**

**HANOI** Vietnam said on Friday it has culled 2 million pigs in a bid to curb an outbreak of deadly African swine fever and called on the entire nation to join the fight against the rapidly spreading disease. **REUTERS**

# Spelling Bee ends in historic tie

Seven Indian-origin students are among eight to jointly claim the 2019 prize

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
OXON HILL**

Reaffirming the dominance of Indian-Americans, a record seven Indian-origin students were among eight who jointly won the prestigious 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee, taking home more than \$50,000 in cash and prizes in an "unprecedented" competition.

It is the first time in the 94-year history of the contest that more than two co-champions have been named. It was also the first time since 2007 when an American student, Erin Howard, was among the winners.

Rishik Gandhasri, 13, of California; Saketh Sundar, 13, of Maryland; Shruthika Padhy, 13, of New Jersey; Sohum Sukhatankar, 13, of Texas; Abhijay Kodali, 12, of Texas; Rohan Raja, 13, of Texas; Christopher Serrao, 13, of New Jersey and Howard, 14, of Alabama were named as co-champions.

For Rishik Gandhasri, the winning word was "auslaut." Erin Howard spelled "erysipelas" correctly. Saketh Sundar won on "bougainvillea." And Shruthika Padhy won



**Word whizz:** Shruthika Padhy, Erin Howard, Rishik Gandhasri, Christopher Serrao, Saketh Sundar, Sohum Sukhatankar, Rohan Raja and Abhijay Kodali in Oxon Hill. **REUTERS**

with "aiguillette." Sohum Sukhatankar spelled "pendeloque" correctly. Abhijay Kodali spelled "palama" right. Christopher Serrao won with "cernuous." Rohan's winning word was "odylic."

"I was last," Rohan said after it was all over. "I had to watch everybody get applause," he said.

**Uncharted territory**

Each of the eight students will receive the full winner's prize of \$50,000 in cash. In all, 50 of the 562 spellers reached the finals, 34 of them eliminated during the afternoon rounds.

The six boys and two girls combined to spell the final 47 words correctly over five consecutive perfect rounds in the most extraordinary ending of the competition.

"In an unprecedented display of academic achievement, eight spellers have become co-champions of the 2019 Scripps National Spelling Bee, making history as the first group to share the coveted title in the 92 years of the storied event," the organisers tweeted.

Thursday night's finals went on more than an hour and half past the scheduled time with words like "omphalopsychite," "Geeldik-

kop" and "aufaktigkeit".

The competition, broadcast nationally, kicked off on Tuesday with its biggest field ever. The 565 contestants ranged in age from 7 to 14 and came from across the U.S. and several other countries, including Canada, Ghana and Jamaica.

"Champion spellers, we are in uncharted territory," official pronouncer Jacques Bailly said.

"We do have plenty of words remaining on our list, but we'll soon run out of words that can possibly challenge you, the most phenomenal assemblage of super spellers in the history of this competition," Mr. Bailly said.

The majority of spellers had personal coaches, and 13 of the 16 used word lists and study materials compiled by ex-spellers Shobha Dasari and her younger brother, Shourav.

Last year, 14-year-old Indian-American Karthik Nemmani won the Spelling Bee, taking home \$42,000. He correctly spelt "koinonia" to become the 14th Indian-American champion in 11 consecutive years.

# 'Time to start studying females too'

In experiments, the 'default' practice was to examine males as they were less 'complex'

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
WASHINGTON**

U.S. neurobiologist Rebecca Shansky recalled her first experiences studying mice in the lab two decades ago: the "default" was to study males.

"The primary excuses for not including females in your research was first that hormones just made everything so complicated that you were... going to have a difficult time if you tried to study the brain in female animals," said Ms. Shansky, explaining the conventional wisdom at the time.

Ms. Shansky's article published in the journal *Science* on Thursday denounces that practice as based on outdated gender stereotypes from the 19th century that are continuing to influence scientific research today.

In science, women were traditionally considered



Scientists focus their studies nearly exclusively on male mice. **GETTY IMAGES**

more complicated versions of men.

Researchers believed menstrual cycles and the biological changes that went along with them made women "hormonal, emotional and unstable" study subjects, Ms. Shansky, who is now at the neuroanatomy and behaviour laboratory at Northeastern University,

said. For half a century, the proliferation of this myth caused scientists to focus their studies nearly exclusively on male mice, rats and primates, so that a male brain became considered the baseline for a human brain.

But male mice can have their own hormonal changes too, with one to five times the level of testosterone depending on whether or not they are dominant — though scientists considered such changes a "non-issue" in males, Ms. Shansky wrote in her paper.

**Side effects**

That means that for decades, pharmaceutical labs developed drugs that were later found to be a poor fit for many women's bodies or brains, especially when it comes to mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety,

which affect more women than men.

The sleep aid Ambien is a famous example: it caused more side effects in women than in men.

"It turns out that women should actually be taking half the dose that men do because they metabolize the drug really differently," Ms. Shansky said.

Dosage recommendations were changed in 2013.

Things are slowly changing. A new field of research is emerging that focuses on the differences between the sexes when it comes to anti-cancer treatments.

And since 2016, publicly funded research from the National Institutes of Health requires studies to consider sex as a biological variable.

"Money is a good motivator for people, and so I think that will help," Ms. Shansky said.

# Japan unveils policy to curb plastic waste

It plans to press for a deal at G20 summit to reduce plastic dumping into the ocean

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
TOKYO**

Japan on Friday announced a policy to reduce marine plastic waste, part of efforts to raise the issue at the G20 summit it will host next month.

Japan is hoping to cast itself as a leader on the issue, and will reportedly press for an international agreement to reduce the amount of plastic going into the ocean during the Osaka summit from June 28 to 30.

"Ocean plastic waste is one of the issues topping the G20 summit agenda, and as the chair of the meeting, we will exercise leadership to solve the matter," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told a ministerial meeting that adopted the policy package.

But so far the policies are



**Clean ocean:** Globally, an estimated eight million tonnes of plastic waste ends up in the sea each year. **AP**

largely theoretical, with no timeline specified for legislation needed to implement some of the programme.

Japan is the second largest per capita producer of plastic waste in the world after the U.S., and while it has a comparatively high recycling rate, it lags behind on efforts

to reduce single-use plastic.

Included in the policy is a plan to require retailers to charge customers for plastic bags, though it remains unclear when that will come into effect and whether all retailers will be affected.

Plastic bag charges are already common in many

parts of the world, and the European Union in March passed legislation banning other single-use plastic including straws and cutlery from 2021.

Japan's policy aims to recycle 100% of newly produced plastics by 2035 and promotes the use of biodegradable alternatives to oil-based plastic.

The package also includes a plan to support Southeast Asian countries with recycling technologies and other infrastructure, the government said in a statement.

Globally, some eight million tonnes of plastic waste is estimated end up in the sea each year. From Japan, some 20,000 to 60,000 tonnes of plastic wastes are estimated to flow into oceans annually, the government said.

## A dance at last



**School days:** Graduate cadets dance with young women during a ceremony on the last day at the military lyceum in Kiev, Ukraine, on Friday. Ukrainians today celebrate 'Last Ring,' a celebration of their last day of school. **AP**

# From illiterate to author: ageing South Koreans embrace the written word

67.7% of people aged 80 or above cannot read or write, a 2017 study said

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
SUNCHEON**

Hyper-wired South Korea is the world's 11<sup>th</sup>-largest economy, one of its most technologically advanced countries, and the first to launch a nationwide 5G network.

But that is a relatively recent transformation and at the other end of the spectrum, many of its elderly are illiterate.

Now some are finally learning to read and write, decades after their contemporaries — and even becoming published authors.

**Patriarchal society**

According to a 2017 study by the National Institute for Lifelong Education, 67.7% of South Koreans aged 80 or older were unable to read or write.

The phenomenon is significantly more pronounced among women — Korea has been a patriarchal society for centuries and many families kept girls from school even into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, as the country began its rapid industrialisation.

"My grandmother used to say a woman with knowledge always ends up rebellious," said Jang Seon-ja, 75, at a library in Suncheon.

"So she forbade me from school," she explained.

It is a marked contrast



**Beating the odds:** Elderly South Korean women attending a class at a city-run library in Suncheon. **AFP**

from the present day, when families put enormous emphasis on education and chil-

dren — whether boys or girls — study for longer hours, including extra after-school

## Philippines returns trash to Canada

**AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE  
MANILA**

Tonnes of garbage sent to the Philippines years ago was shipped back to Canada on Friday after a festering diplomatic row, as Asian nations increasingly reject serving as dumping grounds for international trash.

The 69 shipping containers of garbage were loaded onto a cargo vessel at Subic Bay to begin the lengthy trip to Canada.

# E-cigarettes pose public health risk, says ICMR

Dismisses claims that devices can help cut tobacco use

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI**

The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has warned of a potential public health disaster if action was not taken to completely prohibit and dissuade the use of Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (ENDS) or e-cigarettes given that the nicotine delivered by these devices adversely affect almost all systems in a human body.

E-cigarette use adversely affects the cardiovascular system, impairs respiratory immune cell function and airways in a way similar to cigarette smoking and is responsible for severe respiratory disease. It also poses risk to foetus, infant, and child brain development, the council noted in a white paper released on Friday.

**Harmful effects**

"Use of e-cigarettes has documented adverse effects on humans which include DNA damage; carcinogenesis; cellular, molecular and immunological toxicity; respiratory, cardiovascular and neurological disorders and adverse impact on foetal development and pregnancy," said Prof. Balram Bhargava, director general ICMR.

Given the harmful health effects e-cigarettes pose to users, as well as passive exposure, failure to make appropriate interventions at the right time — by bringing



E-cigarettes adversely affect cardiovascular system. **GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO**

together all stakeholders under one umbrella to prevent this impending epidemic of e-cigarettes use — could lead to a public health disaster in India, Dr. Bhargava asserted.

With any benefit that e-cigarettes may offer as a tobacco cessation aid yet to be established and evidence suggesting that there were risks of both dual use and the initiation to tobacco addiction among non-smokers, these products, on balance, had a net negative impact on public health, the ICMR noted.

In its response, Association of Vapers India (AVI) in a statement said that the white paper does not present the true picture.

"The findings of the ICMR paper run counter to empirical data from countries where e-cigarettes are regulated and research conducted by some of the most credible organisations in the world. This could be because they have cherry-picked studies to make a targeted case against e-cigarettes," said Samrat Chowdhery, director of AVI.

Observing that tobacco consumption, especially cigarette smoking, had shown a decline in India in recent years, Prof. K. Srinath Reddy, president, Public Health Foundation of India and cardiologist and public health

expert who had chaired the ICMR expert group for this white paper, said that this had been achieved through several tobacco control measures that had already been initiated. "Thus, at this juncture, marketing of a product like e-cigarettes, with unproven benefit and high potential harm from addiction and health risks, is unwarranted as a tobacco control measure," said Dr. Reddy. "The risk of youth addiction is high," he warned.

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