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Cold fusion warmed over - March 24, 2009

Cold fusion was a heart-stopping idea. Take some off-the-shelf electrochemistry kit, add heavy water and presto - no more energy crisis.

It's twenty years since Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann made their now-infamous announcement that they could generate energy by initiating nuclear fusion with this set-up (Wired, The Guardian).

The claim was pretty much discredited within a couple of years - but pockets of research have continued to try to coax nuclear reactions out of their system, or something like it.

The latest news from this tiny field has just been presented at the American Chemical Society's (ACS) spring meeting in Salt Lake City. How fitting - the very place where Fleischmann and Pons unveiled their results to the world.

There have been surprisingly few news stories about the most eye-catching work at the conference, press released here as a 'rebirth' of cold fusion.

The PR talks of "compelling new scientific evidence for the existence of low-energy nuclear reactions (LENR), the process once called "cold fusion" that may promise a new source of energy."

The compelling evidence, explains team member Pamela Mosier-Boss of the US Navy's Space and Naval Warfare Systems Center (SPAWAR) in San Diego, California, is the discovery of energetic neutrons coming from their device, a find which was published earlier this year.

It's worth noting that Mosier-Boss *et al* have been ploughing this furrow for a long time, and found a home for their work at the ACS spring conference two years ago, when the group reported seeing energetic charged particles in the
system.

The general feeling from physicists, nicely outlined in New Scientist's coverage, is that these researchers certainly appear to be seeing something odd involving atomic nuclei - but it doesn't involve fusion. Looks like I'm going to have to find that 1.21 gigawatts somewhere else …

Posted by Mark Peplow on March 24, 2009