Briefing

Center for Short-Lived Phenomena Spins Off

The Center for Short-Lived Phenomena (CSLP) in Cambridge, Massachuetts, has departed the bosom of its mother, the Smithsonian Institution, and is now seeking its fortune as an independent, nonprofit corporation. The center's busy-minded, globe-hopping director, Robert Citron, has been seeking to go private for some time, as he believes the outfit will have more freedom to do what it wants, when it wants to, now that it is no longer a government agency.

The CSLP, established in 1968, has developed a fairly glamorous reputation as a nerve center recording unorthodox events around the planet—such as volcanic eruptions, insect infestations, meteorite falls, and man-made pollution disasters. With the aid of a network of some 2000 people around the world, it collects information and transmits it to scientists and others (*Science*, 11 January 1974).

According to the center's associate director Richard Golob, a break with the Smithsonian became increasingly desirable as the center got more involved in "applied" things like pollution monitoring and educational activities. The Smithsonian has been more interested in a narrower service geared to the needs of scientists. The Smithsonian, therefore, has established a small, in-house Scientific Event Alert Network to continue transmitting news of planetary surprises. The alert network now has about 350 correspondents whose reports go into a monthly bulletin.

The CSLP, meanwhile, is heading for the big time. It wants to expand its role as *the* global center for monitoring unexpected natural and man-induced environmental events. It has started a science information news service to communicate events instantly to subscribers the world over. It plans to publish books. It wants to tie in with the United Nations Environmental Program and various international scientific groups. And it is looking into the possibility of establishing a branch in Seattle.

Whether all this comes to pass depends on money. Now that it no longer gets free use of computers and telephone lines, as well as funds, from the Smithsonian, it will have to do some hustling to accumulate the $150,000 estimated as the necessary annual budget. So far it has gotten $20,000 from the Sloan Foundation in "transitional funds" and is looking for more. Golob says most income is expected to be derived from the sale of services but acknowledges that right now the financial situation is pretty rocky. However, everyone is very keen and dedicated in the first flush of independence, he says, and the place is "beginning to take on the aura of a Ralph Nader organization."—C.H.

Plague Incidence Up in U.S.

Plague—the Black Death of the Middle Ages—has never been eradicated. In the western United States, infected rodents constitute a reservoir of plague bacteria that could start an epidemic. Although the United States has not had a major plague outbreak since 1924, public health officials have noted an upward trend in the number of cases in humans in the Southwest over the past decade.

The number of cases of human plague is still small and hardly conjures up visions of death carts rattling through the streets, but the increased incidence is great enough to cause real concern. According to figures compiled by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), there were 20 confirmed cases in 1975 compared to only eight in 1974 and two in 1973. However, more individuals—at least eight—have been stricken thus far in 1976 than in the same period of 1975, and the peak plague season of June, July, and August is just beginning.

In 1975, four of the persons who contracted the disease died. Three of them had pneumonic plague, in which the plague bacteria spread to the lungs. This form of the disease is highly contagious and can spread rapidly from person to person without the aid of a flea vector. Its development enhances the possibility that an epidemic may be triggered. Allan Barnes, of CDC's Vector-Borne Diseases Laboratory in Fort Collins, Colorado, said that it was necessary to track down several hundred persons who had been in contact with the pneumonic plague victims and to treat the contacts prophylactically with antibiotics. (Plague can be successfully treated with antibiotics but it is still a dangerous disease because of the speed with which it can kill if untreated.)

Fleas ordinarily serve as the vectors that transmit plague bacteria from rodent to rodent, and, more or less accidentally, to humans who happen to be in the right place at the wrong time. Although rats have often been linked with transmission of plague to humans, the cases identified so far this year have all been in rural areas of the Southwest, according to Barnes. In these areas, squirrels and prairie dogs are probably the culprits.

Barnes thinks that expansion of human populations into hitherto sparsely populated or wilderness regions is bringing more people into contact with rodents that are known to harbor the plague bacterium (*Yersinia pestis*). As the human populations increase in these regions, the potential for a major outbreak of plague also increases. There is little evidence for the presence of plague-bearing rodents east of the 98th meridian which runs through western Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Officials of CDC do consider the observed increase in human plague in the past year and a half to be real and not just a reflection of normal cyclical variations in plague incidence. The number of plague cases tends to peak about every 5 years. In 1970, the previous peak year, there were 13; and in 1965, there were only eight.

Normally the peak incidences of plague in humans coincide with epizootics in susceptible rodents. Barnes says that plague surveillance programs indicated that the incidence of plague in rodents peaked in 1975. Consequently, he expected a decline in human cases this year and has been surprised by the continued increase. Now, CDC has initiated a special surveillance program in conjunction with the Environmental Improvement Agency of New Mexico to find out more about what is going on in the rodent populations of that state, where four of the eight confirmed cases of human plague have occurred.

Although the number of confirmed cases of plague is comparable to that of swine flu in humans, there are no plans for a massive vaccination program. The number of individuals infected is still small and their locations dispersed over a wide area. In any event, vaccination against plague is an unwieldy business requiring several shots over a period of a year. Public health officials may be worried, but for now they simply plan to maintain a close watch over the plague situation.—J.L.M.