Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

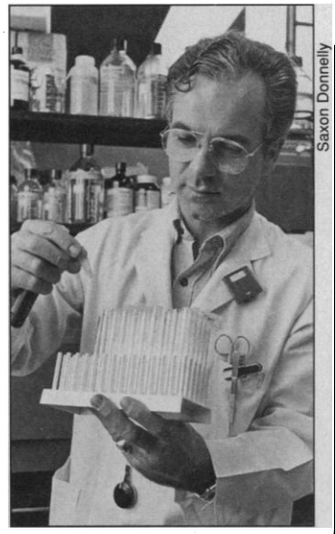
Virology Dead, Says Duesberg

Peter Duesberg is at it again. The University of California virologist first gained notoriety for pooh-poohing the notion that oncogenes play a role in human cancer and later for trumpeting his view that HIV does not cause AIDS. Now he has announced that virology is dead as a clinical science.

In a letter to his division head at U.C. Berkeley, Duesberg declined to teach virology because "there is no significant clinical frontier in viral pathogenesis since the polio epidemic was ended in the '50s, and thus viruses have become mostly an academic issue."

Duesberg acknowledges the role of active viruses in acute diseases such as polio, herpes, and influenza. But the pathology of those diseases is now just medical history, he says. And he bristles at the fact that latent—or inactive—viruses are blamed for a variety of diseases. Cervical cancer, hepatoma, and Burkitt's lymphoma, for example, have been linked respectively to papilloma viruses, hepatitis B virus, and Epstein-Barr virus.

Duesberg insists that in these diseases there is too little virus present to cause illness. He recognizes that their presence is formally compatible with the theory that they have a causal role, but he favors the legal principle of "innocent until proven guilty" over the usual scientific method, in which a hypothesis remains a candidate until it is disproven. Duesberg told *Science* he can't teach about viruses "because I don't believe in them enough." Perhaps this stand will exempt him from teaching any course that relies on the scientific method.



Saxon Donnelly

Peter Duesberg

Hopeful News for CF Pilot Studies

James Watson and the National Center for Human Genome Research at NIH, which he heads, have agreed to take the lead in securing funding for pilot studies on cystic fibrosis screening. This follows a rash of complaints from geneticists that NIH, after endorsing these studies a year ago, has not come up with the money (*Science*, 23 November, p. 1076). They say such studies are desperately needed, as this could be the biggest and most complicated genetic screening program yet in the United States.

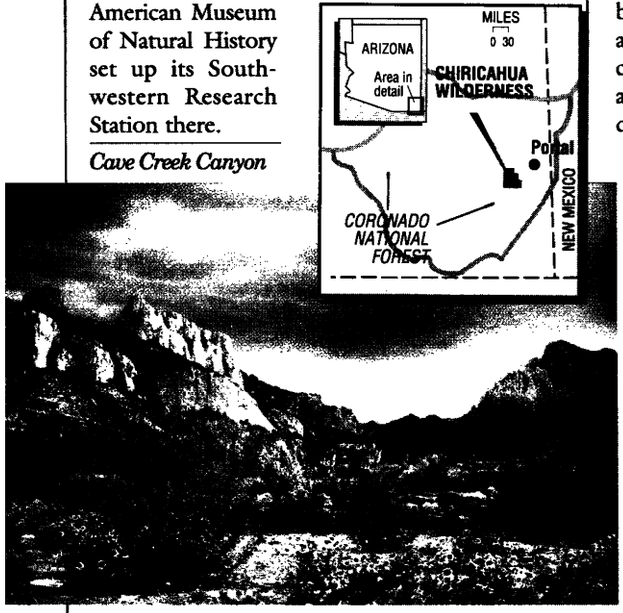
So far, the companies that offer the DNA test have heeded pleas to delay widespread testing. "But that grace period is coming to an end," said Nancy Wexler of Columbia University at last week's meeting of the Program Advisory Committee on the Human Genome. David Cox of the American Society of Human Genetics said his colleagues are so exasperated with NIH that they intend to ask companies to fund pilot studies directly. Watson objected, saying it would look like a conflict of interest, and urged the committee to decide whether the genome project should fill the void.

The reason it hasn't stepped in so far is that clinical studies fall outside its purview—and they are likely to cost $500,000 a pop. So genome officials have been approaching NIH institutes and even outside agencies, offering to split the bill, but without much success. Watson argued that in any case, "It makes more sense for one place at NIH to be in charge." Wexler, too, prodded the committee to take the lead, arguing that "part of our mandate is to anticipate major problems. Well, this is it."

Some committee members were still leery that if the genome office takes on this pilot study, it will be saddled with studies for each new genetic test. But in the end, the com-

Cyanide in Them Thar Hills?

The Chiricahua Mountains in southern Arizona are known for their spectacular scenery as well as varied landscapes, from desert to sprucey peaks, that support an unusual diversity of plant and animal life. The area near Cave Creek Canyon, in particular, has been a mecca for field biologists since the late 1950s, when New York's American Museum of Natural History set up its Southwestern Research Station there.



Cave Creek Canyon

Karen Hayes

Now, to the horror of local residents and visiting scientists, this pristine area is being threatened by an open-pit gold mine. Newmont Mining Company, a British and South African-owned concern that is the largest mining company in North America, has staked a claim to 720 acres and has been granted an exploration permit by the U.S. Forest Service.

Citizens of Portal, a tiny town at the base of the mountains, have been mobilizing frantically since they learned of the project 2 months ago, and have formed a Portal Mining Action Coalition to battle Newmont. According to local biologist and writer Noel Snyder, the issue has stirred up concern among hikers and bird-watchers from around the country as well as biologists who have done fieldwork in the Chiricahua area. Among public interest groups that have taken up the cause is the Mineral Policy Center in Washington, D.C., headed by Stewart L. Udall, Arizonan and former interior secretary.

Newmont officials have emphasized their environmental sensitivity and have said that there is only a 1% chance that exploration will reveal minable gold. But that hasn't stopped the local activists from charging that mining in the area would be a scenic, scientific, and environmental disaster, with cyanide from the gold-leaching process threatening groundwater supplies.

Snyder says that after a recent meeting with the coalition, the Forest Service agreed to consider a formal proposal, now being prepared, to withdraw the land from "mineral entry." If that move fails, the citizens' group, which has gained support among members of the Arizona congressional delegation, hopes Congress will move to withdraw the lands from mineral exploration.