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GARY STROBEL

Biotech Firm Licenses Taxol-Making Fungus

Taxol is no longer a one-company drug. In a move that may someday drive down the price of the anticancer compound, Dallas-based Cytoclonal Pharmaceuticals Inc. was expected to announce today (30 July) that it has agreed to try to commercialize a taxol-producing fungus.

Taxol, a treatment for ovarian, breast, and other types of cancer, began to make headlines a few years ago when environmentalists complained that the Pacific yew tree—the only source of taxol at the time—might be wiped out in order to obtain the compound. In recent months, however, the sole purveyor of the drug, New York's Bristol-Myers Squibb, has devel-



Industrial strength? Taxol fungus.

oped alternative taxol sources that it says should obviate concerns over the yew. Even if the tree species is no longer threatened, taxol's price is likely to remain high (\$3,000 to \$10,000 per patient) and has drawn fire from Representative Ron Wyden (D-OR),

who feels it's too expensive.

The concern shifted from preservation to price in April, when plant pathologist Gary Strobel and chemist Andrea Stierle of Montana State University (MSU) discovered a yew fungus that, like its host, makes taxol (*Science*, 9 April, p. 154). Several firms, Bristol-Myers included, launched negotiations with MSU; Cytoclonal won the bidding with a promise of royalties and a cool million for MSU research.

Cytoclonal's chief executive officer, molecular biologist Arthur Bollon, expects to quickly scale up taxol production in the fungus (*Taxomyces andreanae*). "I think we'll have it ready for clinical testing in less than a year" and on the market in 5 years, he predicts.

Dingell Pursues AIDS Patent 'Cover-Up'

Congressional watchdog John Dingell (D-MI) may beat federal investigators to the punch with his own magnum opus on allegations of misconduct by AIDS researcher Robert Gallo. That was the word from Dingell staffers last week, who say they plan to release a report on the furor this fall.

Dingell, who heads a House investigations subcommittee, has had his staff digging into the dispute over the discovery of the AIDS virus since 1989, when the *Chicago Tribune* first alleged that Gallo exaggerated his role in the discovery. A Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) appeals board plans to review the case in November.

Dingell hinted at the tone of his upcoming report at a hearing last week in which he questioned former HHS official Lowell Harmon about his role in obtaining a patent for a blood test for AIDS based on Gallo's research. Dingell said he expects his inquiry will reveal allegations of a cover-up in which HHS officials "may have willfully ignored and...actively suppressed" evidence that Gallo misrepresented his role in discovering the AIDS virus. HHS officials may have sunk to these levels, Dingell alleges, to maintain "international prestige and significant financial rewards" associated with the blood-test patent.

Harmon is unimpressed with Dingell's case. "It's a fishing expedition—a complete waste of the taxpayers' money," he told *Science*.

NRC, Toxicologists Butt Heads Over Lead

After spending more than 4 years preparing a report on how best to measure tiny amounts of lead in the blood, a committee of the National Research Council (NRC) learned recently that the council had refused to endorse portions of the report and would not distribute it. Earlier this week, the NRC changed its mind and accepted a modified version of the report, which will bear the NRC imprimatur. In an unprecedented decision, the council balked initially because its leadership felt the study group had tackled issues outside its official mandate.

The study panel, chaired by University of Maryland toxicologist Bruce Fowler, had been asked by the NRC to evaluate methods of assessing environmental exposure to lead in "critical" populations, such as young children and pregnant women. However, after the panel turned in a draft report, president of the National Academy of Engineering and acting NRC chairman Robert White found fault with it. He outlined his concerns in a letter dated 29 June to Barry Johnson, assistant administrator at the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), which paid

the council \$450,000 to prepare the report. The panel, White wrote, "decided to address various lead abatement, economic, regulatory, and policy issues that go far beyond the agreed scope of study....Therefore, the committee's recommendations in these areas are not endorsed by the NRC." White stated that the report—a copy of which he'd enclosed for Johnson—would be available only through the National Technical Information Service, a decision that one toxicologist says would amount to "banishing the report to the graveyard."

But ATSDR, the sponsor, refused to accept White's terms. Earlier this month Johnson returned

the report and "asked that the council redouble their efforts to come to an agreement on the report," he told *Science*. Although the council panel "did a real good job," Johnson says, without the NRC's unbridled endorsement ATSDR "found the draft report not useful to our purposes."

Fowler was traveling and unavailable for comment. However, a panel member and NRC spokesman Stephen Push confirm that the panel has revised the report—apparently to the NRC's satisfaction. Johnson says an NRC staffer called him earlier this week to say that the NRC would fully endorse the latest version, which is expected to be released in September.

Politics Takes Toll on SSC

After the House voted to kill the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) earlier this month, the state of Texas decided to withhold a \$79 million contribution it had planned to give the project this year for operating expenses. State legislators say they don't want to invest more money in the SSC until the federal government antes up its share. That puts SSC planners in a bind. "We have had to jam on the financial brakes with very short notice," SSC director Roy Schwitters told employees last week.

The belt tightening has left casualties. In the past month the lab has laid off more than 300 temporary employees, mostly engineers, technicians, and clerical

aides. It has virtually prohibited travel, forcing staff scientists to cancel trips to scientific conferences, and suspended some construction, including excavation for two detector halls. The resulting disarray has forced the lab to postpone an advisory committee review of the scientific program until October at the earliest.

SSC officials hope to tough out the months of uncertainty without cutting permanent staff. Meanwhile, they see a silver lining to the dark cloud: The money troubles have squelched talk of the Department of Energy (DOE) replacing SSC management (*Science*, 9 July, p. 157). Says one official, "There's no way DOE could recruit anyone new to come here now."