RANDOM SAMPLES

edited by FAYE FLAM

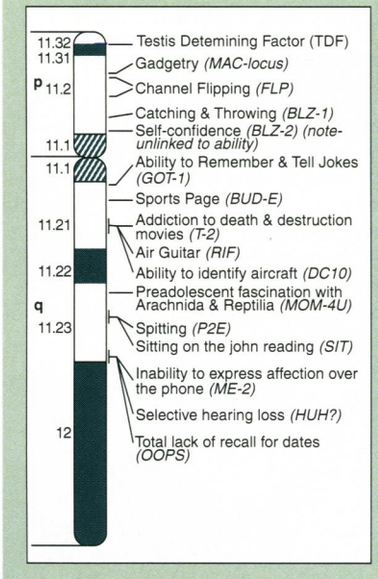
French AIDS Tests Get the Hook

It seems that barely a day goes by in Paris without some new AIDS-related controversy hitting the headlines. Now the attention centers around the French health ministry, which last week abruptly pulled nine HIV blood tests off the market—a move that has surprised medical diagnostics industry officials and shaken many individuals who took the tests, since they are now unsure of their negative results.

Deputy Health Minister Philippe Douste Blazy explained that the kits had performed poorly in a recent evaluation. But the decision to pull them quickly came under fire from many quarters, even from the scientist who tested the kits.

"I don't approve of this decision," says Anne-Marie Couroucé, who heads the retrovirology group at the French National Institute of Blood Transfusion in Paris and tested the performance of all 31 HIV tests marketed in France. She used a panel of 40 blood samples in her evaluation, and most of the nine withdrawn tests gave a false negative on just one sample—from an HIV-infected person who had only recently seroconverted. It's extremely difficult to diagnose such a sample correctly, says Couroucé.

Industry sources expressed surprise and disagreement with the health ministry's decision, but declined to comment in detail until they have studied Couroucé's data in full. Most observers, however, believe that the health ministry is taking a tough line on the HIV tests to demonstrate to the public that standards have improved greatly since the mid-1980s, when HIV-infected clotting factors were accidentally distributed to hemophiliacs (*Science*, 23 July, p. 422). But if the health ministry is trying to calm public anxiety, it seems to have failed. A telephone helpline, set up to reassure people who have tested negative for HIV, was last week swamped with calls from worried individuals.



Why Map Y?

The Y chromosome, found in Rodney Dangerfield and all other men, don't get no respect. Many geneticists have dismissed this stunted scrap of DNA as a genetic junkpile—mostly filler. But when recent research suggested that the Y may carry scores of genes after all, no one was less surprised than geneticist Jane Gitschier of the University of California, San Francisco. In fact, she had already come up with her own map of the Y, shown at left, which combines cutting-edge genetics with classic seat-of-the-pants behavioral empiricism. Shown by Human Genome Project head Francis Collins at a recent meeting, the map is the careful product of years of ob-servation and the contributions of many colleagues. Not all males will display all traits, of course, and expression is variable. For example, Gitschier notes that *air guitar* in men over 50 is usually expressed as *air violin*.

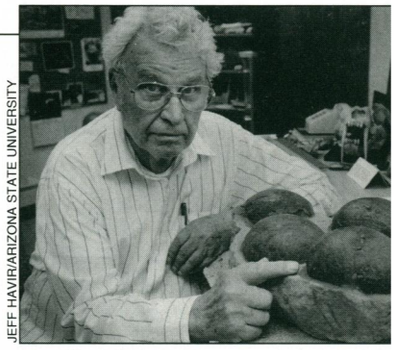
Are there any other loci on the Y? Fax suggestions to Random Samples Genome Initiative (RSGI), c/o *Science*, Fax: 202-371-9227.

Agent Orange Risks Reassessed

Despite claims by Vietnam veterans, there is still no telling whether hundreds of vets were indeed injured by exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange. The scientific evidence is incomplete: Researchers have found military records too vague to determine which veterans were exposed and how much exposure they received. Even if exposures were known, the jury's still out on the human health effects of dioxin, Agent Orange's suspect component.

But last week, upon congressional request, the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a 600-page report that may bolster the case against the chemical. The IOM report cited research done outside Vietnam, in both animals and people, that showed a link between herbicides like Agent Orange (which contains dioxin as contaminant of the manufacturing process) and three cancers—soft-tissue sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and Hodgkin's disease—as well as the skin diseases chloracne and porphyria cutanea tarda (PCT).

This evidence was enough to convince federal authorities to add two of the maladies—PCT and Hodgkin's disease—to the other three already on the veterans compensation list, despite the fact that the IOM committee wasn't able to say that any Vietnam vets had actually been exposed to high enough levels of the herbicide to cause the illnesses. To help answer that question about these other possibly linked diseases, IOM recommended that a nongovernment organization be commissioned to develop more sophisticated methods of historical reconstruction of human exposure.



JEFF HAVIR/ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Egg find. Robert Dietz got dinosaur eggs for ASU.

Dinosaur Egg Bonanza Floods U.S. Market

Even before there was *Jurassic Park*, the movie, there were *Cretaceous eggs*, the marketing godsend. Dinosaur eggs were few and far between in the commercial fossil trade until this past year, when flood waters in southeast China uncovered a treasure trove of more than 1000 eggs, laid sometime during the Cretaceous (140 million to 65 million years ago) and worth $1,000 to $3,000 apiece to fossil fanciers, who have been snatching them up.

But these beautiful, undamaged eggs are coveted not only by collectors, but by paleontologists eager to probe their clues to the past. Scientists still know very little about them. Dug from the deposit by local farmers, the eggs started arriving in this country through private channels. No one knew the exact age of the eggs or what other fossils might be associated with them.

Given the dearth of scientific documentation of these fossils and the recent friction between paleontologists and commercial collectors over collecting rights (*Science*, 16 October 1992, p. 391), dealers "realize they're walking a fine line," says Wayne Thompson, who is marketing Chinese dinosaur eggs for Parsons Minerals and Fossils of South Dakota. Some scientists working with dealers have started to fill in the missing details by probing them with CT scans, translating the Chinese scientific literature, and contacting Chinese scientists. A more complete history should be available before *Jurassic Park* is out on video.