SCIENCESCOPE

edited by RICHARD STONE

U.N. Set to Merge AIDS Programs

The World Health Organization's Global Program on AIDS (GPA), formed in 1986, now seems unlikely to last beyond its 10th anniversary. But scientists hope that folding it into a new and larger international organization will increase funding for AIDS research.

Next month, the United Nations Economic and Social Council is expected to rubberstamp a proposal to replace GPA and the separate AIDS programs of five other U.N. agencies—the World Bank, the U.N. Fund for Population, U.N. Development Program, UNICEF, and UNESCO—with a new "Joint and Co-sponsored U.N. Program on HIV/AIDS." The program would be headquartered in Geneva starting in 1996.

GPA, which accounts for about 80% of the $100-million budget of the six programs, is the only one that includes a major research component. Michael Merson, GPA's director, hopes that the merger will be viewed favorably by the agencies now funding U.N. AIDS programs and that, as a result, his $18-million annual budget could rise by as much as 50%. Among the priority areas for expansion are studies on the social and economic aspects of AIDS.

So far, most donors are waiting to see who will lead the new program, and whether that person has a clear strategy on how to combat AIDS. Current efforts don't address the societal factors that hamper efforts to discourage high-risk behavior, says Jonathan Mann of the Harvard School of Public Health and GPA's founding director.

Will the new U.N. program shape up differently? "I'm hopeful, but doubtful," says Mann.

U.S. Biotech to Seek Asian Benefactors

If you run a small biotech company with barely enough cash to fund research, you probably don't have time or money to spend getting up to speed on the venture-capital markets in East Asia. That's why the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO) is counting on strength in numbers: This November it plans to sponsor a trade mission to China, Hong Kong, Japan, and Singapore for honchos from 20-odd small companies.

U.S. venture capitalists, already skittish because of a slumping stock market, have been scared away from investing in new biotech companies because of fears that health-care reform might lead to price controls on new drugs. Even though Japan's stock market isn't faring much better, small biotech companies are banking on greater success in East Asia, says Robert Beckman, president of Intergen, based in Purchase, New York, and one of the trip's organizers. But until now they have never had the resources to unlock the legal, cultural, and administrative secrets for doing business in other countries. As a result, says Beckman, "typically small companies don't have access to Japan."

Analysts are praising the effort. "It's a good idea," says Jeffrey Casdin of Merrill Lynch. "The industry is getting desperately short of equity," he says. BIO president Carl Feldbaum says a trip to Europe is on the agenda for next year.

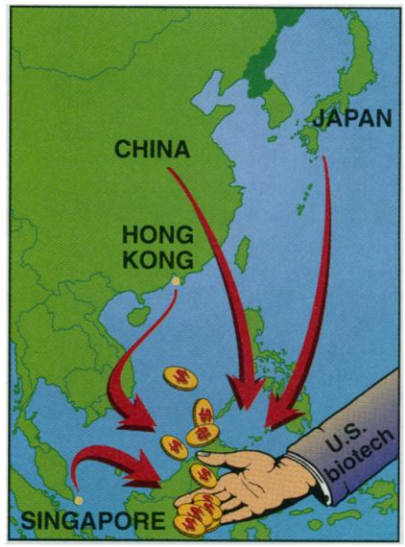

ILLUSTRATION: E. CARROLL

Help wanted. U.S. biotech companies hope for an East Asia gold rush.

Mystery Virus Fells Donor Baboons

Baboons from a colony used in human organ transplants have fallen victim to an outbreak of a mysterious new strain of virus that causes encephalitis-like symptoms. At least seven baboons have been infected at the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research in San Antonio, which boasts the largest baboon colony in the world. It is also a major supplier of baboons for baboon-to-human organ transplants.

The new virus, which appeared last year, causes "disorientation, occasional limping or staggering, and progresses into paralysis," says Southwest Foundation veterinarian Michelle Leland. The baboons deteriorate rapidly, she says, and are usually euthanized within a week of the first symptom.

The Southwest Foundation scientists have so far eliminated about 50 viruses that are known to cause encephalitis in humans and baboons. They suspect that the mysterious virus, which affects the central nervous system, is a type of reovirus. Reoviruses are usually relatively benign, infecting the upper respiratory and gastrointestinal tracts.

The possibility of a baboon transmitting an unidentified virus to humans alarmed infectious disease experts 2 years ago when Thomas Starzl's transplant team at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center used a Southwest baboon in the first baboon-to-human liver transplant. Infectious-disease specialists argued that placing a baboon liver into a human body was dangerous in part because the liver might harbor unknown viruses that are dangerous to humans.

The baboons had been screened for viruses that posed a known risk to humans, such as the simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). But animal virologist Ronald Montalero of the University of Pittsburgh notes that "unknown viruses were always a major concern in xeno-transplants."

NSF to Firm: Leggo My LIGO Land

The National Science Foundation (NSF) appears to have resolved a land dispute involving the site of half of the agency's largest construction project ever, the $260-million gravity wave detector called LIGO. Any delay in construction could prevent NSF from meeting its goal of having Louisiana, home to Senator J. Bennett Johnston (D–LA), a powerful Congressional supporter of LIGO, be the first of the project's two sites to begin operations in 1998.

LIGO features two laser interferometers that will shoot light down L-shaped, 4-kilometer-long tunnels. The idea is to measure gravitational waves—predicted ripples in space caused by events such as merging black holes. NSF chose sites in Hanford, Washington, and Livingston, Louisiana, in a competition after Congress gave the go-ahead in 1992.

Construction began earlier this year at Hanford. But down on the bayou, negotiations have snagged over efforts by the site's owner, Cavanham Forest Industries Inc., to win assurances from NSF and Louisiana State University, which will buy the land and lease it to NSF, that they would be liable if its surrounding land were damaged. Last month, the two sides reached a tentative agreement on the issue, but the paperwork has not yet been completed.

There's still a small chance NSF won't have to delay the scheduled ground breaking on 23 June if the necessary environmental permits are awarded quickly, says David Berley, NSF's LIGO program manager. Yet LIGO officials say they won't wait too long for the Louisiana site once Hanford is finished and the interferometer is ready to be installed.