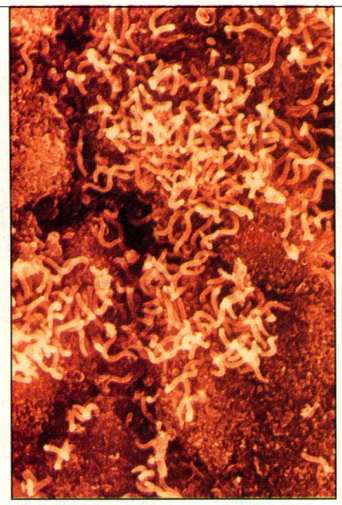
SCIENCESCOPE

edited by ELIOT MARSHALL

Seoul to Host Vaccine Institute

After a 7-month search for a site in the Asian-Pacific developing world, a United Nations agency is ready to announce that it has chosen a location for an ambitious new international vaccine research center: the campus of Seoul National University in South Korea. The International Vaccine Institute will be the first of its kind—an autonomous, not-for-profit operation to help vaccine producers in developing countries conduct research, test products, monitor field trials, train staff, and deploy new vaccines. Among the diseases to be targeted are measles, cholera, malaria, and typhoid—which kill about 8 million children each year in developing countries.

The initiative is being coordinated by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as part of the Children's Vaccine Initiative, launched in 1991 with the goal of providing affordable vaccines to all the world's children to protect against major childhood diseases. Co-sponsors include the World Health Organization, UNICEF, the World Bank, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the UNDP. South Korea will provide the start-up costs, estimated at $50 million, and about 30% of the $15-million annual budget.



VERONIKA BURMEISTER/VISUALS UNLIMITED

Lethal enemy. Cholera and other childhood diseases targeted.

"We are delighted" to be chosen, says Sang-Dai Park, dean of research affairs at Seoul National University and coordinator of the successful bid to host the institute. He says Korea has never before been selected to house such an organization. However, Korea already has a burgeoning drug industry and is one of three major world exporters of Hepatitis B vaccine. John R. La Montagne, a member of the UNDP site selection committee and infectious-disease expert at the U.S. National Institutes of Health, said he was "very impressed with the strength of Korean science" and particularly "their commitment to research." Construction at the site will begin next year, and by 1 January 1998, the institute should be up and running with 40 to 50 senior scientists and 200 support staff.

A New Chief for ITER

Management troubles at the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor (ITER) fusion project have claimed its director, Paul-Henri Rebut. Last week Rebut released a statement reporting that the ITER council—made up of officials from the joint sponsors, the United States, the European Union, Russia, and Japan—will ask him to leave, and he will comply. The council has been concerned that Rebut was doing too much of the ITER design work himself, leaving out teams from the partner nations (*Science*, 17 June, p. 1655). In a draft resolution, expected to be approved at its next meeting on 27 July, the council names Robert Aymar, currently director of materials research at the French atomic energy agency and the former head of the French fusion program, to replace Rebut.

Biomedical Trust Fund Advances

When Senators Tom Harkin (D–IA) and Mark Hatfield (R–OR) came up with a proposal last year to create a trust fund for biomedical research by imposing a 1% levy on health insurance premiums, few people thought the idea would fly. But as Congress rushed to draft several health reform bills in time for the 4th of July recess, the notion of creating an endowment for the National Institutes of Health gained credibility. Four bills now include some form of the concept: a proposal from the House Ways and Means Committee, which provides a 0.5% research tax on insurance premiums; a bill from Senator Robert Dole (R–KS), which calls for voluntary contributions by an income tax return checkoff; a bill from six moderate members of the Senate Finance Committee, which calls for the checkoff and a biomedical set-aside of fines on pension law violations; and a bill from Finance Committee Chairman Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D–NY), which includes a 0.25% tax on insurance premiums. It is too early to tell if any of these bills has a chance of passing, but lobbyists for biomedical research are delighted that they all embrace the biomedical research fund in principle.

Europe Regulates Genetic Test Data

Genetic testing for insurance and employment purposes could be banned across most of Europe within a few years under the terms of a treaty released in draft form last week by the Council of Europe, a 32-nation intergovernmental body. Known as the European Bioethics Convention, the treaty would allow individual governments to make their own choices on some issues such as whether to allow embryo research. But the move to prevent insurers and employers from using genetic test results is a more radical step: Among Council of Europe members, only Belgium has legislated on the subject, prohibiting the use of genetic information in life insurance.

The Council of Europe member nations will vote on whether to adopt the bioethics convention by early 1995. If adopted, as expected, it will become binding in countries that subsequently ratify the convention, coming into force after the first five ratifications. While the process could take several years, says Council of Europe lawyer Carlos De Sola, "we expect this convention will be [widely] ratified."

Panel Backs Pole Station, Questions Funding

A blue-ribbon panel convened by the National Science Foundation (NSF) has strongly endorsed a new U.S. station at the South Pole (*Science*, 24 June, p. 1836), finding the science compelling and the design suitable. The panel of outside scientists and administrators, chaired by former NSF director Guy Stever, concedes one major uncertainty: Where will NSF find the $175 million needed to rebuild the 20-year-old Amundsen-Scott Station over the next 8 years?

The report, submitted last week to NSF Director Neal Lane, suggests NSF develop a contingency plan for a lower rate of funding. "The plan [for the station] is fine if they get the money," says David Schramm, an astrophysicist at the University of Chicago and a member of the NSF panel, which met on 23 to 24 June. "But we think they should have a backup plan if they get, say, only $10 million in the first year." But Cornelius Sullivan, director of NSF's Office of Polar Programs, says that the need for a new station is so great that "the rest of the $225-million program will take a hit if necessary," to build the polar facility.

President's AIDS Chief Expected to Leave

AIDS Czarina Kristine Gebbie will soon be job hunting, says a well-placed government source. According to the source, Gebbie's ouster is linked to mounting criticisms from AIDS researchers and activists who say she has failed to improve the government's attack on AIDS. Clinton appointed Gebbie the White House AIDS Policy Coordinator in June 1993; no successor has yet been named. Meanwhile, a spokesperson for Gebbie said she had not been asked to resign, adding that "we have a lot of work to do."