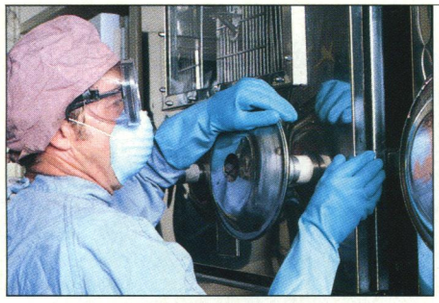
edited by RICHARD STONE



JON FEINGERSH/UNIPHOTO

AIDS data by e-mail? Results, such as this primate work, may first appear on Internet.

Publicizing AIDS Data Early and Often

The occasional advances on the AIDS front that appear in the scientific journals tend to emerge from a primordial pool of results invisible to all but those nearest to the research. However, some of those hidden data may soon be more widely shared: National Institutes of Health (NIH) officials want to know what scientists think about a proposal to create an electronic bulletin board devoted to work in progress.

According to William Paul, director of NIH's Office of AIDS Research, scientists would post non–peer-reviewed abstracts—similar to those presented at scientific meetings—on the Internet. The idea is to reduce the amount of money wasted on unpromising lines of research pursued because results were not forthcoming in the scientific literature. The bulletin board might resemble NIH's GenBank, a computer database that allows researchers to freely access DNA sequences before publication.

Some AIDS researchers say they like the idea; others are cautious. "An unrefereed bulletin board for a disease like AIDS... could be downright dangerous for patients," says Stanford geneticist Lee Herzenberg. "It would not be bad if it were just scientists reading it because we criticize each other's work. But the public doesn't necessarily know how to do that," she says.

Paul says he'll abide by scientists' wishes. "We think it would be valuable, but if the community doesn't, then it would be foolish to pursue it," he says. Comments can be sent—by e-mail, of course—to Paul, wp1k@nih.gov.

Senate Nixes USGS Ecosystems Initiative

An $11.8-million U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) hydrological research initiative, aimed at bolstering efforts to restore damaged ecosystems in South Florida and on the West Coast, is hanging in the balance. The Senate has axed the project, and the USGS is now lobbying hard to get at least some of the funds restored.

USGS requested the bulk of the money ($8 million) for South Florida, where it wants to study water flow through canals and mangrove swamps, mercury contamination, and other hydrological issues to help other agencies predict the effects of the proposed $3 billion Everglades restoration project. Another $3.8 million was for ecosystems research in the Columbia River basin, where development has decimated salmon runs, and in Oregon's Klamath and Trinity rivers, and the San Francisco Bay.

But a Senate subcommittee that oversees the Interior Department's budget deleted the funding because it says the programs would "duplicate efforts" by other agencies. The equivalent subcommittee in the House has allotted about three-fourths of Interior's request in its version of the appropriations bill.

USGS insists the initiative would produce novel data. In Florida, "all agencies collect some hydrological data, but not what is needed to look at the ecosystem on a regional scale," says hydrologist John Vecchioli, chief of USGS's Florida district. Interior headquarters shares his concern: earlier this month, it sent a letter to participants in an upcoming conference to reconcile the two bills asking that the initiative be spared.

Making Sure Biotech and War Don't Mix

Biotech companies beware: If your firm has an airtight lab for infectious-disease research or if it studies organisms that could be turned into biological weapons, you may soon be subjected to international inspections. This measure is one of many that will be on the table when signatories to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) meet in Geneva next month to discuss how to strengthen the treaty, which outlaws development, testing, and production of bio-warfare agents.

Testifying before the Senate recently, CIA director James Woolsey called biological weapons "the most troubling proliferation threat in the coming decade." But while countries have devised elaborate methods for verifying adherence to missile treaties, signatories to the 20-year-old BWC have only recently begun to develop similar safeguards against germ warfare.

Now Congress is pressing the Administration to seek stricter verification measures. In a letter to President Clinton last week, a bipartisan group of 33 Senators led by Herb Kohl (D–WI) and Carl Levin (D–MI) called for a "global verification system to strengthen the BWC." Referring to measures now being formulated by technical advisers to the BWC signatories, the Senators stated that "a regime of mandatory declarations and routine and challenge visits would ...help to deter illicit activities."

Verification may mean compulsory inspections of biotech firms, breweries, and other fermentation-based industries as well as some academic labs. The prospect has "us concerned about the protection of confidential proprietary information," says Alan Goldhammer, director of technical affairs for the Biotechnology Industry Organization. Verification measures could effect "a large number of companies," he says. Assuaging skittish industries will be a high priority for BWC negotiators next month.

Environmental Voice Joins Dioxin Debate

When the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) releases its long-awaited report on the health effects of dioxin—probably next month—expect dueling interpretations from two new scientific groups. The Science and Environmental Health Policy Project (SEHPP), headed by David Rall, former director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, is now being formed to "counter false claims" that dioxin may pose only a minimal threat. Earlier this year an industry-sponsored project was established to critique the report (*Science*, 4 March, p.1211).

The study has already been the focus of internal dispute within the government. Last May, a draft of EPA's risk characterization of dioxin—a key chapter for guiding federal policy—ignited a furor among scientists in some agencies. Critics questioned the scientific basis for several of the report's conclusions (*Science*, 20 May, p. 1071). An EPA official says the report has been revised to take these criticisms into account. But like earlier versions, the report is expected to heighten concerns about dioxin's reproductive and developmental effects and somewhat diminish concerns about the compound's ability to cause cancer in humans.

David Rall

SEHPP plans to weigh in on EPA's side. Rall says he formed SEHPP because he "was upset about the way dioxin is being treated [in some press accounts] as an increasingly harmless compound." The project counts Environmental Defense Fund scientist Ellen Silbergeld among its advisers, and is supported by Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Rall, who's coming out of retirement to take on the project, has his sights set on more than dioxin. SEHPP has a "smorgasbord" of things to tackle, he says, noting "I would like to revisit Alar," a controversial compound once used to slow the ripening of apples.