Canavan Gene Therapy Protocol

In his 15 March News & Comment article "New Zealand's leap into gene therapy," Eliot Marshall states that I, the chairperson of the Yale Human Investigation Committee, first learned of the Canavan gene therapy project "from a local paper" (p. 1489). Matthew During, the project's principal investigator, in his letter "Gene therapy in New Zealand" (26 Apr., p. 467) protests that he made me aware of the project very early in the course of its development. Both accounts are correct.

Marshall asked me if a story he had heard—that I had first learned of the Canavan project by reading a local newspaper—was true. I replied with words to the effect: Yes, but that's not the whole story. As soon as I read that newspaper article, I continued, I phoned During to inquire about the project. He told me that the story was premature and exaggerated in its suggestion that he was close to being able to treat people with Canavan disease; that he had nothing to do with the story (it was instigated by relatives of the patients who wished to raise funds for his basic research); and that as soon as he could foresee any possibility of extending his work to involve human subjects, he would contact me promptly.

During honored his commitment to contact me promptly when it appeared that he could proceed with studies involving human subjects. The Yale committee approved the Canavan gene therapy protocol on 21 December 1995.

To my knowledge, there was no attempt on the part of During to evade his responsibilities to various oversight committees and regulatory agencies.

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Response: The chronology sketched by Levine suggests that During's assessment of the research changed abruptly. Although During told Levine in June 1995 that he did not foresee any possibility of a human trial, he appealed to Levine's panel 5 months later, on 21 November, for accelerated approval of such a trial. During and the other authors of this "therapeutic" protocol, as they called it, sought quick action from the panel because "We, the investigators, as well as the families[,] feel that with each passing day, the likelihood of success is diminished." They wrote that a full federal review would be "inappropriate . . . in view of the urgency of the need of these 2 children [the patients]." The Yale panel gave a green light in December. After two delays, New Zealand regulators gave approval in March 1996.

—Eliot Marshall

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Clotting Dispute

In the News & Comment article "Clotting controversy" (J. Friedly, 29 Mar., p. 1800), I was surprised to find a quotation attributed to me, giving the impression that I recently made a public comment on the legal disputes between the Scripps Research Institute and Mount Sinai Medical Center. In fact, the quotation was apparently taken from an old 1988 letter to the editor of *Cell*, referring to the purpose of our 1987 *Cell* paper to report research, "not [to] attempt to make priority claims." Further, although I am described in Friedly's article as Thomas Edgington's "Scripps colleague," I left the employ of Scripps almost 7 years ago and have not worked with Edgington since that time. The resurgence of unfounded allegations and counterallegations in the press is personally repugnant, and I decline to be drawn into such pursuits.

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