# SCIENCESCOPE

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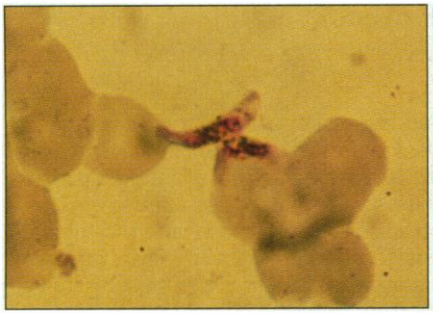

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**Targeting a killer.** Researchers are gearing up to sequence genome of *Plasmodium falciparum,* which causes malaria.

## Malaria Genome Project Ready to Roll

Malaria, estimated to cause more than 1 million deaths a year, will be coming under renewed attack by molecular biologists, who have just won support for an international project to sequence the entire genome of the malaria parasite. Scientists attempting to decipher the genetic code of the deadly strain *Plasmodium falciparum* recently reported progress in solving technical issues, which helped win funding.

The largest pledge comes from the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD's) Military Infectious Disease Research Program. Its director, Colonel William Bancroft, confirms that his office plans to spend $8 million to sequence *falciparum* over the next 5 years. A second major funder is Britain's Wellcome Trust, although its commitment hasn't been announced as yet. Others include the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) ($1 million) and the U.S. Burroughs Wellcome Fund ($4 million).

The plan would support sequencing at the Sanger Centre near Cambridge, England, and at The Institute for Genomic Research (TIGR) in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Other labs in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia will help.

Would-be sequencers of *falciparum* have been frustrated since the 1980s because of the daunting size of its genome (30 million base pairs, more than twice the size of yeast, the largest genome sequenced to date), and because it has proved difficult to clone accurately into the bacterial vectors used in sequencing machines. But earlier this month, scientists from the Sanger Centre and TIGR reported that they are finding ways around these problems. The results were "exciting," according to Naval Medical Research Institute malaria researcher Stephen Hoffman, who says the Sanger team has now sequenced 20,000 bases of the parasite's chromosome 3 (one of 14 chromosomes). And DOD's Bancroft says: "We're optimistic that things are going to start rolling now." NIH's Michael Gottlieb, who organized the meeting, confirms that researchers are optimistic about solving the cloning problem.

The research teams are still working out details of the collaboration, such as when and how to release DNA data. They plan to meet again 6 months from now in Cambridge, England.

## Treaty on Database Access Stalled

The scientific community's worries about a new international treaty on database rights appear to be over—at least for now. Negotiators in Geneva were to complete work on the agreement this week, but never even began serious talks because they ran into opposition from U.S. scientists and developing nations, and time ran out.

Researchers argued that the proposed treaty, which was drafted by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) to protect databases from piracy, would hinder their access to data and increase costs (*Science*, 15 November, p. 1074). The National Research Council (NRC) and other scientific groups wanted clear exemptions for scientific data in the agreement. "We're heartened to see this outcome," says NRC staffer Paul Uhlir, who has been following the issue. "There were just too many questions to rush into this."

The Administration initially favored the WIPO draft, which it claimed would have little effect on scientists. But an outcry from a variety of groups—including scientists—led to a split within the U.S. government. As a result of this opposition and objections from other countries, the negotiations focused only on separate copyright and performing arts treaties and never got to the meat of the database agreement, according to Administration officials. It's not clear when the database talks might resume.

Meanwhile, the White House Office of Science and Technology is smarting over an accusation by the U.S. negotiating team that an OSTP observer at the talks acted improperly. White House sources say that Mike Nelson, OSTP special assistant for information technology, distributed information to other negotiating teams in Geneva that represented the position of the U.S. software company Netscape, which differed from the views of the U.S. government.

While one source characterized the situation as a "misunderstanding," another official said both Vice President Al Gore and OSTP chief Jack Gibbons "were embarrassed and angered" by the incident. Nelson declined comment.

## Fisher Loses Appeal in Privacy Suit

University of Pittsburgh cancer researcher Bernard Fisher has lost an appeal of his suit charging the government with smearing his reputation. Fisher, former director of a national breast and bowel cancer study, had sued the Department of Health and Human Services for attaching labels 2 years ago to electronic citations of his papers containing warnings such as "scientific misconduct—data to be reanalyzed." The labels stemmed not from a misconduct investigation of Fisher, but from a co-author's admission of falsifying data.

On 27 November, a panel of the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., issued a motion affirming a lower court's decision last June to dismiss Fisher's suit. Fisher's lead attorney, Robert Charrow, says his team will now submit a motion asking the full court to hear the case. "It's very difficult to say" what the outcome will be, Charrow says, noting that "the chances in the appellate process are never good." If the motion is denied, Fisher can appeal to the Supreme Court.

## Mars Rock Finding Spurs Competition

The race is on to try to knock down or confirm last summer's report of possible fossilized life in an ancient Mars meteorite found in Antarctica. Last week, the National Science Foundation (NSF) released a solicitation for research on the topic, 2 weeks after NASA made a similar announcement. The two agencies are putting up a total of $2.3 million this year for work in fields ranging from paleontology to meteorite petrology. And there's no mistaking the purpose: "To investigate and resolve, to the extent possible, recently reported evidence suggesting a biological origin for certain phenomena within Martian meteorite ALH84001," states NSF's solicitation.

The lead author on the controversial report (*Science*, 16 August, pp. 864 and 924) says his team is ready for the challenge. Says geologist David McKay of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston: "I encouraged NASA to do this, and we believe that there's a good chance we'll be proven right. I'm telling them to check us out." NASA has asked for final proposals by 29 January, while preproposals are due to NSF 2 days later.