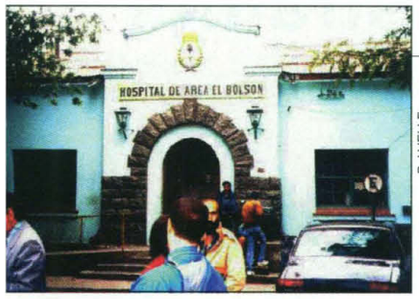
edited by JOCELYN KAISER



B. HJELLE

Hot zone. Researchers are seeking DNA data on hantavirus in El Bolsón, Argentina.

Human-to-Human Spread of Hantavirus?

Researchers in Argentina may have found the first known cases of person-to-person transmission of hantavirus, an often lethal infectious agent normally transmitted only by rodents. The cases are part of an outbreak since September in and near the Andes town of El Bolsón, where a score of people have been infected with hantavirus, of which half have died. The lung failure triggered by the virus was identified as a major health threat in 1993 after it caused a spate of deaths in the U.S. Southwest.

Hantavirus expert Brian Hjelle of the University of New Mexico, who recently visited the outbreak area, says there are "several cases that are incredibly hard to explain except by person-to-person spread." The most striking involves a 13-year-old girl who had not been near the disease area but may have picked up the virus after joining her parents, both of whom had been infected in El Bolsón. Researchers at the Carlos G. Malbran Institute in Buenos Aires, the country's major center for infectious-disease research, have published other anecdotal data suggesting that the virus may have been passed from person to person.

Hjelle and C. J. Peters—chief of the special pathogens branch at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), who visited Argentina last month—each hope to collaborate with Malbran researchers to confirm these reports. They want to obtain DNA "fingerprints" of local strains of the virus and track the route of infection. Neither Hjelle nor Peters has received DNA samples so far, however. And one U.S. researcher suggests that the Argentines have been distracted by a government reorganization in December that led to sharp budget cuts and layoffs at Malbran. Elsa Segura, Malbran's director, confirms that the government reorganization has taken an emotional toll. But she says the collaboration with CDC is moving forward and that hantavirus research has not been slowed.

Broader Oversight for Research on Humans?

Concerned that some research with humans may not meet ethical standards, one lawmaker is proposing to tighten oversight of clinical studies. A bill offered last week by Senator John Glenn (D–OH) would extend an ethical rule designed for federal projects to all public and private research.

Federal grants are already subject to the Common Rule, which requires that researchers obtain approval for human experiments from an institutional review board, fully inform test subjects about the risks, and obtain subjects' written consent. Drug companies are covered indirectly: They must show the Food and Drug Administration that they have complied with the Common Rule. The problem, says a Glenn staffer, is that "there is no law saying that all research involving human subjects must have informed consent." For agencies conducting in-house research—including, for example, Army scientists doing classified studies—following the Common Rule is voluntary. Nor does it apply to state-funded studies or research by private institutions not receiving federal funds.

Glenn's bill would require that all institutions and agencies studying human subjects register their compliance with the Common Rule with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and it would create criminal penalties for violations. To put more distance between enforcers of the rule and a major funder of research, the bill would move the Office for the Protection From Research Risks from the National Institutes of Health to the Office of the Secretary of HHS. The bill will be referred to the Labor and Human Resources Committee.

Panel Warms to New South Pole Station

An expert panel appears ready to back plans by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to build a replacement for its South Pole station. Its endorsement would aid NSF's campaign for congressional approval this year of $25 million to start the project, expected to cost at least $150 million over the next 8 years (see p. 609).

The panel's report is due in March, but hints of its conclusions appeared in a 2-page "interim letter report" sent last week by its chair, Lockheed Martin CEO Norman Augustine, to NSF officials. The letter, a copy of which was obtained by *Science*, says that the quality of existing facilities in Antarctica "is not in keeping with the standard expected of a nation of America's stature," and many structures "are increasingly unsafe." The letter also notes that the continent's geopolitical importance "justifies a year-round presence at several locations ... including a moderate-sized facility at the Pole."

NSF officials declined to comment on the letter. But they should be pleased: The letter calls the program "well managed" and says its research is of "high quality." And it gives weight to plans by NSF, which runs the U.S. Antarctic program, to upgrade communications and health and safety conditions at the Pole. However, the letter is silent on how to pay for the new station—specifically, how much should come from cuts in polar research programs. A White House committee last March asked the panel to consider the impact on science of building a new station within a flat NSF budget.

Yale Courts Kessler

Science has learned that David Kessler, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), has been offered the deanship at Yale University's School of Medicine. Kessler last month announced his intention to resign after 6 years as chief of FDA, where he took steps to reduce drug approval times, regulate nicotine as a drug, and beef up FDA science. At Yale, Kessler would oversee 4000 faculty and staff and a $200 million research budget.

Kessler and Yale officials declined to comment. However, Yale faculty contacted by *Science* were enthusiastic about Kessler. His experience with industry and with tight budgets would be valuable, says cell biologist Thomas Lentz: "It's up to us to convince him to come."

Downsizing at JPL

With no major scientific spacecraft left to build, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) intends to turn over more work to private industry and scale back its staff over the next 3 years. JPL director Ed Stone says that by 2000, the number of lab employees will fall from the current 6300 to 4800. The downsizing will be especially painful this year: JPL intends to slash 700 people from its payroll by October. Hardest hit will be support staff who handle business systems and spacecraft operations, Stone adds.

The shrinkage reflects the end of an era for JPL. NASA chief Dan Goldin has pushed the agency to devise simpler designs that can be built faster for lower costs. The $1.3 billion Cassini satellite, designed to study Saturn and built at JPL, is the last of a series of such massive projects. Once Cassini is shipped out this spring, JPL's long history of building increasingly larger and more complex planetary spacecraft will end. There are plenty of smaller missions on the lab's drawing boards, including a series of Mars probes and a major infrared space telescope. But much of the construction will be done by private contractors like Lockheed Martin rather than at the lab.