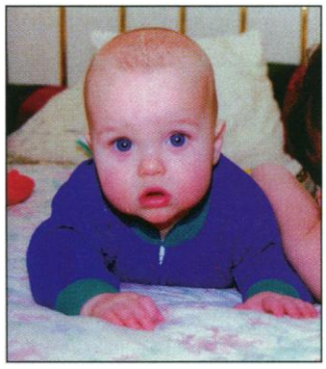
edited by JOCELYN KAISER

Russia Steps Into AIDS Research Arena

Russia is beginning to come to grips with a newly recognized health threat: AIDS. Later this spring, the Russian government will launch its first AIDS research program, a $15 million effort to develop a vaccine against HIV.

Russia's public health has eroded since the end of the Soviet Union, with some infectious diseases becoming rampant. Yet, officials have been reluctant to acknowledge the spread of AIDS. Government estimates put the number of HIV-infected Russians at several thousand, including about 1000 cases of full-blown AIDS. However, says AIDS researcher Dimiter Dimitrov of the U.S. National Institutes of Health, "the general opinion is that the numbers are much higher."

To lead the new program, approved by the lower house of parliament (the Duma) in the 1997 budget, Russia has chosen two respected Moscow-based immunologists: Ram Petrov of the Institute of Bioorganic Chemistry and Rakhim Haitov, head of the Institute of Immunology. They have not yet laid out their research plans. But it's clear to at least one Russian immunologist that the duo will have firm control of the non–peer-reviewed funds: "Their own research groups will be well supported," he predicts.



PETER D. HENRY

Nurturing young neurons. White House is highlighting brain development in babies.

Clintons to Discuss Kids and Neuroscience

First Lady Hillary Clinton has made children's welfare her highest public priority, and now she's bringing some science to the issue. On 17 April, a select group of scientists and educators will meet privately in the White House to talk about how neuroscience research reinforces the need to treat humans well in utero and during early life.

The Clintons have both been talking up the meeting—Early Childhood Development and Learning: What New Research on the Brain Tells Us About Our Youngest Children—over the past 2 months. But the event, which will include about 170 parents and educators, is being hastily thrown together, with invitations going out only last week.

A half-dozen scientists have been invited. This week, the White House wasn't saying who's on the list, but *Science* has learned that it includes Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington, who does developmental studies on young infants, University of California, Berkeley's, Carla Shatz, who studies prenatal brain activity in mammals, and Harry Chugani of Wayne State University, who has done positron emission tomography scans of the brains of severely deprived orphans. The morning will be devoted to explaining early brain development; in the afternoon, says White House spokesperson Pat Lewis, the audience will hear about model child development programs such as Chicago's Ounce of Prevention, which covers people from prebirth to age 3.

While many scientists are pleased to see neuroscience getting attention, another invitee, John T. Breuer, head of the James S. McDonnell Foundation in St. Louis, warns that educators may be prematurely trying to base new practices on findings about synapse growth and "critical periods" in brain development. "We really know very little on how [brain function at the level of synaptic transmission] relates to learning in any way that would be useful to a teacher or educator," Breuer says.

U.S. Gains Role in LHC

Membership may have its privileges, but when it comes to joining the CERN particle physics lab in Geneva, the United States may have worked out a better deal. In exchange for helping to build CERN's new Large Hadron Collider (LHC), U.S. officials will get a voice on CERN's policy-setting committee—and a role in shaping the $5 billion LHC. But unlike CERN's 19 other member nations, the United States will not have to pay a share of the lab's operating budget.

Several countries now hold observer status, which allows them to listen to but not to influence CERN's discussions. But the United States' new rank—more than an observer but not quite a member—gives it "a right to come in and say exactly what you like," explains CERN director Christopher Llewellyn-Smith, who joined the Department of Energy's (DOE's) Martha Krebs last week in a presentation about the LHC to the National Science Foundation (NSF).

CERN's policy committee, an arm of the governing council, "works by consensus, not by vote," says Llewellyn-Smith, so the U.S. is "actually much better off than being one vote out of 20." The new relationship, he says, reflects the growing role of non-Europeans at CERN: The U.S. has the largest such delegation, part of the 45% of CERN's scientific users from nonmember nations. He says Japan and Russia may be granted similar status.

CERN is counting on NSF to help finance the LHC's two massive detectors. DOE has already pledged $250 million in addition to $200 million for the accelerator itself. Yet, U.S. legislators are not eager to sign the checks. Krebs says DOE's bid for an "advanced authorization" for the full $450 million over 5 years is probably dead in Congress. "They're not very enthusiastic, so I expect that we will be going back each year," she says. This year's request is $35 million.

Court to Review Expert Testimony Criteria

The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case that could shed some light on a murky area of law: how much leeway federal trial judges have in deciding what qualifies as valid scientific testimony.

The high court changed the rules for such evidence 4 years ago in a case involving the teratogenicity of a drug taken during pregnancy (*Science*, 2 July 1993, p. 22). In *Daubert* v. *Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals*, the court dropped a 70-year-old standard for expert witnesses based on what was "generally accepted" by the scientific community and told judges to decide for themselves whether the methodology in question was "scientifically valid." But since then, there has been "massive disagreement and confusion" about how far judges can go, notes Arthur Bryant of the Washington, D.C.–based public interest law firm Trial Lawyers for Public Justice.

The new case, *General Electric Co.* v. *Joiner*, involves an electrician who claims that his lung cancer was "promoted" by job exposure to polychlorinated biphenyls in transformers made by GE and Westinghouse. (Monsanto was also sued.) In 1994, a Georgia court threw out the testimony of two expert witnesses for the plaintiff. But an appeals court decided the lower court had overstepped its gatekeeper role. On 17 March, the Supreme Court agreed with the companies' request to consider a narrow question: what standard appellate courts should apply when reviewing a trial court's rejection of expert testimony.

Legal experts are hoping the court may also clarify its *Daubert* decision. Bryant argues that judges have exceeded their bounds in assessing not only methodology, but experts' conclusions. But Dallas attorney Bert Black, who expects to file an amicus brief for GE, says "no scientist would make that kind of distinction." Oral arguments are expected after September.