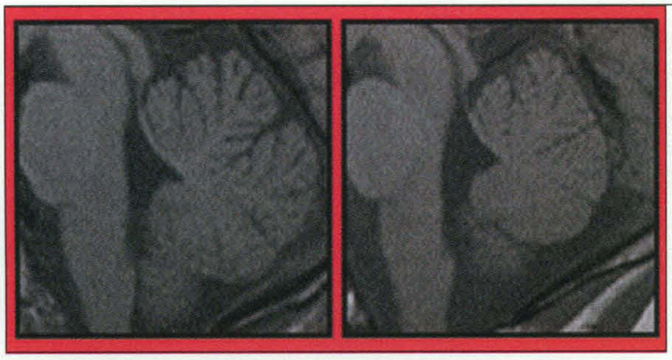
edited by JOCELYN KAISER



COURCHESNE/NEUROSCIENCE OF AUTISM LAB/UCSD

Autism clue. Compared to normal child's brain (*left*), brain of autistic child appears to have undersized cerebellum.

NIH Launches Autism Project

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) is initiating an all-out effort to uncover the genetic and neurobiological roots of autism, a mysterious developmental disorder that affects about 400,000 Americans.

Although autism's hallmark symptoms—difficulty interacting socially, speech problems, and repetitive behaviors—were first described 50 years ago, there is no biological test for the disease, and researchers have only recently identified a gene that may contribute to it (*Science*, 9 May, p. 905). To step up the pace of autism research, NIH announced last week that it will fund a $27 million, 5-year network to study several hundred families affected by autism in five countries.

Researchers at 24 universities will search the families' genomes for links to autism, study brain structure in autism patients, test proposed treatments, and explore biological mechanisms in animals. "I think it's a wonderful idea to make a kind of frontal assault" on the disease, says one participant, Helen Tager-Flusberg, a cognitive neuroscientist at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver Center in Waltham, Massachusetts.

NIH spent $13 million last year on this field, but the new project will be the largest single chunk of money ever made available for autism research. It took a nudge from Congress to get it going, however. At the urging of a parents' group called the Autism Society of America, the Senate and House appropriations committees encouraged NIH to hold a conference 2 years ago on the state of autism research. The conferees recommended a new research initiative, and NIH obliged. Says John Maltby, who chairs the society's foundation, "We're very pleased."

French Scientists Hope for Stronger Support

As *Science* went to press, French researchers were eagerly waiting to hear who their new prime minister, Lionel Jospin, would name as science minister to replace the departing François d'Aubert. Like other top conservative party officials, D'Aubert will be leaving with the turnover of administration brought about by the upset victory last Sunday of France's Socialist Party. Sources say the most likely candidate for his replacement is geochemist Claude Allegre of the Institute of the Physics of the Globe in Paris, Jospin's longtime science and education adviser.

Hopes are running high, as many French researchers had come to view the outgoing conservative government as hostile to basic science. Under the conservatives, research was demoted to a subministry, for example. Researchers hope that the new minister will restore it to full ministerial status and shore up France's flagging research effort—especially by stepping up recruitment of young researchers to replace senior scientists facing retirement. "This is a real crisis," says one leading French scientist who asked not to be identified. "We are in danger of losing a whole generation of researchers." Allegre himself has also recently stressed the importance of beefing up research at universities.

But other scientists caution that the new government may not have the resources to give more than a limited boost to research. "There will be the same economic problems as before," says AIDS researcher Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. At the same time, adds Montagnier, who several months ago accused the conservative government of "holding researchers in contempt": "We are hoping for somewhat less contempt from the new government."

Microsoft, Cambridge Discussing Center

Billionaire Bill Gates, founder of the software giant Microsoft, is negotiating with the United Kingdom's Cambridge University to set up a joint multimillion-dollar software research complex, according to media reports in Britain last week. Gates is also reportedly considering a separate donation to Cambridge for a new building to house an expanded science department.

The research center would be an independent commercial enterprise, but it would have close ties to the university, reports say. Like Microsoft's campus near Seattle, observers speculate, it would concentrate on long-term, strategic research on computer software.

The project is apparently being negotiated by Microsoft executives and a group of academics, including Cambridge astrophysicist and best-selling author Stephen Hawking. His former student, Nathan Myhrvold, is now a top executive at Microsoft. Hawking told London's *Daily Telegraph* that he was pleased his connection with Myhrvold may pay off for Cambridge. A university spokesperson said discussions were still at an early stage, but that the university "would be delighted if an agreement was reached with Microsoft." Microsoft declined to comment.

Genome Pioneer Dulbecco to Quit Italy for United States

Fed up with the paralysis gripping Italy's genome research efforts, Nobel Prize–winning biologist Renato Dulbecco is venting his frustrations publicly. In recent interviews with the Italian press, Dulbecco, who first proposed the Human Genome Project (HGP) that began in 1986, has said he doesn't expect to renew his contract with Italy's National Research Council (CNR) next June and instead plans to return to the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, where he is a president emeritus.

"I wanted to turn Italy into a main hub for advanced biology and biotechnology, but instead, doing research here is a problem," he told *Science*. Dulbecco moved to his native Italy 4 years ago to head its role in the international HGP. But in 1995, CNR funding for the $1-million-a-year effort dried up, and Dulbecco says no resumption is in sight. Dulbecco is dismayed by the council's plans to concentrate on applied research (*Science*, 28 March, p. 1871). "If that is the principle, there is no hope for the genome project," he says. Another frustration, he says, has been his lack of success at getting private funders interested in supporting a national institute similar to the Salk.

Dulbecco, who is 83, will be leaving the Institute for Advanced Biomedical Technologies in Milan, where he studies breast cancer. He will also be abandoning his role as coordinator of a Milan-based project on Parkinson's disease that's just starting to set up the world's first brain-cell bank.