edited by RICHARD STONE

## Mystery Disease Stalks Malaysian Children

A baffling ailment that triggers heart failure in children has surfaced in Malaysia. A team of experts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is now in Malaysia trying to help researchers there find the cause of a disease that has killed 31 children in just 3 months.

The outbreak has been confined so far to the Sarawak region of northwestern Borneo, an island off the coast of peninsular Malaysia. "We've collected a fair bit of data with nothing clearly providing an answer as to what's going on," says CDC's Larry Anderson. Scientists speculate that there may be a link to an epidemic of hand, foot, and mouth (HFM) disease now raging in Malaysia. But HFM, which is caused by Coxsackie A16 and other enteroviruses, is rarely fatal and indeed has not led to any deaths among 2140 children diagnosed with it on peninsular Malaysia last month.

Malaysian officials also suspect Coxsackie B virus, which is linked to myocarditis, as a possible cause of the heart failure disease. Another possibility is enterovirus 71, a bug that causes heart failure and which has been isolated from several of the dead children. The culprit could even be a pathogen never before seen in people, or a toxin. For now, says Anderson, "it's detective work." The Sarawak Health Department is posting outbreak updates on its Internet site, www.jaring.my/jkns/outbreak/virus1.htm.

## Germany to Disband Space Agency

Germany is combining its two space programs into a single center in an effort to save overhead costs and cope with a shrinking space budget. The merger, approved last week by the Cabinet, is expected to wipe out several dozen management positions but spare most research slots.

Since its founding in 1989, DARA has run the space program, while the Cologne-based DLR has focused on R&D. A quarter of DARA's staff of 260, mostly managers, is expected to be eliminated through attrition or transfers by 1999, and DARA itself will dissolve. The fate of DLR's 4500-person staff is unclear, although the organization's 1620 scientists appear likely to keep their jobs.

The consolidation will result in a new organization called the German Aerospace Center that will keep the DLR acronym. Parliament plans to move quickly to implement the merger, now scheduled for later this year.

## More Cereals Join Corn on Genome Platter

Momentum is building in Congress for a Plant Genome Initiative that would focus on several related cereals, including rice, wheat, and corn. The latest plan is more ambitious than one contemplated earlier this year that would have targeted just corn.

According to a Hill staffer, Senator Christopher Bond (R–MO), chair of the subcommittee that allots the National Science Foundation's (NSF's) budget, intends next week to earmark "substantial funding" for the project in a spending bill covering NSF. "This is a blockbuster project, and [Bond] considers it worthy of blockbuster funding," he says. No price tag had been set before *Science* went to press, but the staffer says it likely will exceed $10 million, the amount originally discussed to kick off a corn genome initiative (*Science*, 27 June, p. 1960). Senators may also try to insert money for the project into the funding bill for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Although deciphering the genetics of corn—the United States' biggest cereal crop—remains the initiative's ultimate goal, the project's backers are now pushing for a broader approach after receiving a 30 June report from a federal panel chaired by Ronald L. Phillips, chief scientist of the USDA's National Research Initiative. The panel recommends that the United States team up with Japan and others to sequence the rice genome, which is much smaller than that of corn or wheat and which could provide a baseline genome for making comparisons across species. The group also suggests that initial projects identify gene fragments called expressed sequence tags from corn and "a broad array of other crop plants."

Both the NSF and USDA funding bills are expected to be marked up next week. The fate of these proposals will play out later this summer when the House and Senate hold conferences to settle differences between their bills; the House versions make no provision for a plant genome initiative.

## Britain to Shutter Venerable Observatory

Britain's oldest scientific institution has received its feared death sentence. Following weeks of speculation, the Labour government on 4 July announced plans to close the Royal Greenwich Observatory (RGO) in Cambridge. The RGO and the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, will be merged over the next few years at the Edinburgh site to form an Astronomy Technology Center; up to 100 RGO staff are expected to lose their jobs.

"This decision will allow [the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council] to reorganize the Royal Observatories in a way that best meets their scientific requirements," Science Minister John Battle said in a statement. But RGO officials sharply criticized the move. "This is a betrayal of a branch of science that is part of our culture," said RGO director Jasper Wall.

## Lobbying Blitz Attacks Alternative Medicine

Some big guns—including biologist Paul Berg of Stanford and physicist D. Allan Bromley of Yale—are taking aim at the Office of Alternative Medicine (OAM), home of far-out ideas on medical therapy at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The critics' goal: to annihilate OAM's $12.5 million budget, which comes up for renewal this month. OAM opponents have begun firing off letters to Representative John Porter (R–IL), chair of the subcommittee due to mark up NIH's appropriation on 15 July.

OAM was created in 1992 to probe "unconventional health practices." Some top scientists are now asking Congress to scuttle the whole operation. Here's what they have to say:

- Berg, in a 1 July letter, calls OAM "an embarrassment to serious scientists," adding: "Quackery will always prey on the gullible and uninformed, but we certainly should not provide it cover from the NIH."
- Maxine Singer, president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, D.C., wrote on 30 June that OAM's work is "not usually congruent with" the rigorous standards of main-line research, and that funding should be cut or eliminated.
- Biologist Ursula Goodenough of Washington University in St. Louis wrote on 7 July that "Nothing coming from OAM indicates that it is conducting or planning any studies that would put any alternative treatments to [a] scientific test."
- Former presidential science adviser Bromley wrote on 7 July that OAM has given prestige to "highly dubious practices" that "more clearly resemble witchcraft than medicine"; he recommends terminating the office.

OAM chief Wayne Jonas is undaunted: "Lots of people write letters to Congress," he says. As for rigor, OAM uses standard NIH methods of review.