

# LETTERS



## Choices

A National Research Council spokesman defends the selection of a principal investigator for a study of brucellosis in Yellowstone bison. Editors of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* (left) express their views about the journal's recent privatization. A journalist questions that journal's new copyright policy. Researchers discuss whether any "new" classes of antibiotics have been developed in the last few decades. And the field of "environmental economics" is explored.

### Bison Study Principal Investigator

Andrew Lawler states in his News & Comment article of 20 June (p. 1786) that Norman Cheville, one of the two principal investigators selected by the National Research Council for its study of brucellosis in the Yellowstone area, "is a longtime employee of USDA, which has threatened to decertify the safety of Montana beef because the wandering Yellowstone bison herds are infected with brucellosis." Cheville is not now an employee of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; he is at Iowa State University in Ames, as Lawler states, and carries impeccable credentials. Moreover, when he did work for USDA, he did not work for the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, the regulatory agency involved in the brucellosis eradication efforts and in the Yellowstone controversy. He worked in various capacities (including research leader for brucellosis) for the National Animal Disease Center, part of the Agricultural Research Service.

Lawler goes on to cite criticism of Cheville's objectivity by D. J. Schubert, "a wildlife biologist who works for a public interest law firm in Washington, D.C." Schubert's role and that of his employer are not mentioned. Schubert's employer, Meyer & Glitzenstein, is the law firm that has brought two lawsuits based on the Federal Advisory Committee Act against the National Academy of Sciences and the National Research Council.

All study participants, whether involved in a committee process or as a principal investigator, are subject to scrutiny for bias and conflict of interest according to the procedures of the National Research Council.

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### Privatization of a Journal

I would like to expand on Andrew Lawler's article "Privatized cancer journal triggers Senate reaction" (News & Comment, 6 June, p. 1492). The arrangement between the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and Oxford University Press (OUP-USA) is a Cooperative Research and Development Agreement, a mechanism previously used for the development of various technologies. A major part of the project will be the research and development of a versatile electronic version of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* (JNCI) that will be linked to other cancer information resources. In this age, in which the rapid communication of information is critical to scientific advancement, improvements in information dissemination can be as important for the public health as the development of new diagnostics.

Thus, the NCI:OUP-USA agreement is analogous: government expertise in producing the journal is being researched and developed by OUP-USA to produce an expanded knowledge base that will be made available to the scientific community and the public at a low cost. Subscription prices for the printed journal remain low—the best value for money by far of any journal in the cancer field—and subscribers can now access an enhanced full-text version on the World Wide Web. In addition, contents and searchable abstracts are available to the public on the journal's home page. Profits, if any, will be shared and reinvested in the dissemination of cancer information.

The arrangement provides for a transition during which OUP-USA will assume

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more of the financial burden and NCI will phase out its staff involvement until the entire burden, both in staff and finances, is borne by OUP-USA. This gradual process was deemed necessary to ensure that the quality of the journal would be preserved. In fact, the cost to taxpayers has already been cut because OUP-USA is paying all production, distribution, and marketing costs.

The comments in Lawler's article made by Benjamin Vandergrift, formerly counsel to OUP-USA, do not represent the views of Oxford University Press.

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In my official capacity as executive editor of the *JNCI*, I apologize to Andrew Lawler for being unreachable by telephone when he was developing his 6 June article. We are now literally a movable editorial office, going from one temporary location to another while NIH arranges permanent space. I was eager to answer Lawler's questions. Silence from NCI could give weight to the negative takes of Senators John Warner (R-VA) and

Wendell Ford (D-KY) on lifting the financial burden of this journal from the shoulders of the American taxpayer. Having missed an "official" opportunity to set the record straight, I do so now in a private capacity, as a concerned citizen.

Two years ago, NCI officials planning for the reality of a leaner government recognized that prospects for the *JNCI*'s future as a federal program were dim. Budget pressures had already begun to undercut the infrastructure that supports its high quality. The same pressures precluded its evolution as a state-of-the-art electronic product.

The NCI recognized that the *JNCI* is an asset to the National Cancer Program and worth saving in the public interest. A search began for a private partner willing and able to take on a journal for its quality and integrity rather than a pleasing bottom line. (As ever, quality costs, and the quality infrastructure of the *JNCI* are patterned after those of *Science*, so it has a layer of Ph.D.-level editorial staff that costs a great deal.) After long and careful negotiation, NCI found its match in the nonprofit OUP-USA, the largest university press in this country. NCI and OUP have engaged in a temporary partnership of approximately 5 years that will gradually shift all costs and responsibilities out of the public sector.

The OUP has agreed to fund the development of a state-of-the-art dynamic, interactive electronic cancer information product with the *JNCI* at its center and has assumed all production, distribution, and marketing costs. During the collaboration, the government is providing office space and equipment. NCI and OUP editorial staff are working together on the *JNCI* to transfer to OUP the procedures, systems, and staff that constitute the quality infrastructure. OUP is bound to maintain this infrastructure for as long as it publishes under the *JNCI* name, and the NCI director will continue to name the editor-in-chief. Except for those two links, the partnership will end when the transfer and the electronic product are complete, as will all remaining taxpayer support.

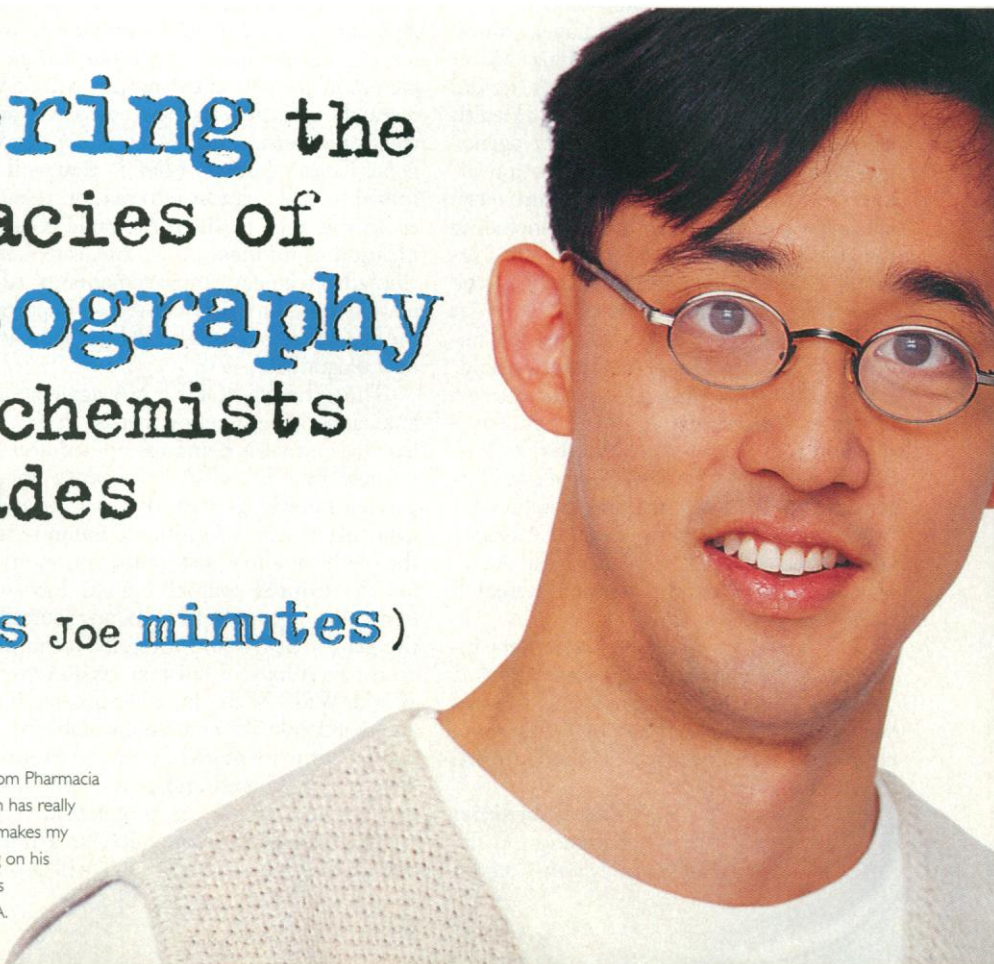
Contrary to what the unidentified Senate aide quoted by Lawler says, this cooperative endeavor is not a government subsidy, and revenues do in fact flow back to NCI from the money OUP takes in for subscriptions. No one expects that this specialty journal, with the quality requirements of a handful of large general scientific or medical journals, will ever make a profit. OUP and NCI believe that it can be self-supporting, however, and that is the goal.

The *JNCI* will survive if that goal ob-

# Conquering the intricacies of chromatography took biochemists decades

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"Using the chromatography columns from Pharmacia Biotech and the technical support team has really minimized my purification time, which makes my PI happy," says Joe Yuan, who's working on his doctorate degree at The Johns Hopkins Medical Institute in Baltimore, MD, USA.



tains—unless the myths about the iniquity of the privatization succeed. According to one myth repeated in the *Science* article, the *JNCI* publishes government information and gives it away to OUP to sell. In fact, this journal, like *Science*, publishes research results from authors around the world, including a small fraction from federal laboratories. We were a government publication for 57 years because the taxpayers had to pay all editorial office and production costs, not because we are different in nature from other scientific journals. OUP has already assumed more than half those costs and will by the end of the partnership assume them all.

The OUP "owns" the *JNCI* in that authors now assign copyright to OUP instead of the government. This makes the *JNCI* a private, not a government, publication. As a private publication, the Government Printing Office (GPO) has informed us, the *JNCI* no longer qualifies for free distribution to libraries in the GPO-run Federal Depository Library Program. We therefore stopped providing 800 copies free to GPO for distribution to libraries. Much to my astonishment, GPO then created the myth that NCI and OUP had cut off free public access to the *JNCI*. In actuality, however, the public has much greater free access to

the *JNCI* now than it did under GPO. Some 2700 libraries across this country pay to receive the *JNCI*, and *JNCI* abstracts are now both free and searchable at the OUP Web site.

Of course, these myths serve the interests of GPO. The GPO is the federal government's giant printing monopoly, created in the 19th century to harness the then new printing technology for the efficient use of all branches of government. It has been an agency of Congress, overseen by a House-Senate Joint Committee on Printing, ever since. Because agencies of the Executive branch cannot "lobby" Congress, GPO has been able to shield the committee from real feedback on its performance and to paint its own view of reality for Congress.

Senators Ford and Warner may not know that GPO almost killed the *JNCI* in 1990: GPO's contract printer filed for bankruptcy, and GPO refused to exercise its legal option to let a second contract at NCI's request. Production was at a halt.

Because Congress had permitted incursions into the GPO monopoly by that time, an NCI office with printing-contract capability was able to come to the *JNCI*'s rescue. This group managed to continue our printing without disruption on an emergency basis for six issues, until GPO could resume.

Needless to say, we were at the same time planning a permanent escape from GPO, with all deliberate speed.

A letter dated 28 May 1997 from NCI Director Richard Klausner to Senator Warner addresses some of the Senator's concerns about the *JNCI* and the cooperative agreement, and an attachment answers 17 questions asked by the Joint Committee on Printing. These answers contradict many statements and impressions contained in Lawler's article.

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Lawler's article about the growing flap over the arrangement that gives the *JNCI* to OUP raises an important question: Should government property created at taxpayer expense become a profit source for a private concern? To this question I would like to add a related concern for those of us who make a living as independent journalists and authors: For the *JNCI* news reports written by freelance contributors, not staffers, the deal in effect subverts the intent of U.S. copyright law.

Under the law, freelancers own the copyright for their works from the time of their creation; ordinarily, they license their

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government publication went into the pub-  
lic domain—in effect, the people owned the  
copyright—a situation understood and ac-  
cepted by freelancers who write for govern-  
ment publications. The copyright for free-  
lancer-written articles published in the  
*JNCI* as OUP publications should remain  
with the writer. OUP, however, has begun  
to demand that freelancers sign over their  
copyrights for the sole, perpetual benefit of  
this privately owned British company.

Copyright law in this country derives  
from Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Con-  
stitution, which authorizes Congress to pro-  
vide for protection of creative works in  
order to encourage "authors and inventors."  
There is no mention of encouraging pub-  
lishers. The *JNCI*'s outside contributors  
should not have to give up the copyrights  
granted them by U.S. law simply to accom-  
modate a British publishing company.

**Claire Safran**  
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## On the Antibiotic Frontier

In their article "Exploitation of mammalian  
host cell functions by bacterial pathogens"  
(2 May, p. 718), B. Brett Finlay and Pascale  
Cossart state (p. 718), "No new class of  
antibiotic has been discovered in the past  
three decades, and derivatives of current  
antibiotics soon encounter resistance." Dur-  
ing the past 15 years, a group of small  
cationic antibiotic peptides has been shown  
to be produced by several animal species,  
including the cecropins of insects, the ma-  
gainins of amphibian skin, and the de-  
fensins of mammalian neutrophils (1). The  
simple chemical structures of many of these  
antibiotics enabled the use of solid-phase  
peptide synthesis technology to rapidly cre-  
ate thousands of structural analogs and de-  
rivatives, some of which are currently in  
clinical trials (2).

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1. R. E. W. Hancock, *Lancet* **349**, 418 (1997).
2. H. G. Bowman et al., *FEBS Lett.* **259**, 103 (1989).

We agree with Wade's statement regarding  
the antibacterial activity of small cationic

peptides and their promise as therapeutic  
agents. In our article, our statement referred  
to antibiotics that are currently in clinical  
use—no new chemical class of antibiotic  
has been introduced into clinical practice  
since 1981. At present, only one cationic  
peptide has passed phase III trials and shows  
equivalence to a quinolone against a local-  
ized infection, although there are several  
others under consideration.

Unfortunately, there are few other new  
types of antibiotics close to clinical use,  
although there are many compounds that  
are under development (1). These include a  
small number of protein synthesis and cell  
wall inhibitors. Lipid A inhibitors are in  
early stages, and other drugs under develop-  
ment are derivatives of existing antibiotics  
(such as vancomycin). The lack of new  
types of antibiotics emphasizes the need to  
understand the mechanisms of bacterial  
pathogenicity, which can then be applied to  
developing new therapeutics.

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1. R. E. W. Hancock, *Clin. Inf. Dis.* **24** (suppl. 1), S148  
(1997).

## Environmental Economics and Ecological Economics

The Random Samples item about a new  
Ph.D. program in ecological economics at  
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute ("Eco-  
Pioneering at RPI", 16 May, p. 1037)  
could leave readers with the mistaken im-  
pression that "conventionally trained  
economists" shun all environmental is-  
sues. Ph.D.-level courses in environmental  
economics thrive at dozens of institutions  
[check the listings of graduate programs  
courtesy of the Association of Environ-  
mental and Resource Economists (AERE)  
at [gopher://UKCC.uky.edu/0text/AERE-  
G!191/GRADS.TXT](mailto:gopher://UKCC.uky.edu/0text/AERE-G!191/GRADS.TXT)].

Since the field evolved from the older  
disciplines of land economics and agricul-  
tural economics, the natural home for these  
Ph.D. programs at many institutions is a  
department of agricultural and resource  
economics. At an institution such as the  
University of California at Los Angeles,  
however, with no "ag econ" department, we