TROPICAL DISEASES

Drug Companies Decline to Collaborate

A group of leading pharmaceutical companies has shot down a proposal for a $180 million joint project to develop new treatments for the world's most threatening tropical diseases, particularly malaria. A group of public and private organizations put the proposal to the drug companies last month, and earlier confidential discussions were thought to be going well. But industry leaders who met in Switzerland decided that there are too many uncertainties and potential commercial conflicts to go ahead. The rejection is "particularly disappointing," says Bob Howells, head of international programs at Britain's Wellcome Trust, one of the proposers of the initiative.

Along with the Wellcome Trust, the proposal was put together by the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Bank, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, and the drug companies Roche and Glaxo Wellcome. The plan was driven by growing concern about the threats posed by some diseases—malaria was the pilot disease targeted in the proposal—in which widespread resistance to the cheapest drugs is developing rapidly. Researchers have perceived a lack of interest among pharmaceutical companies in developing new inexpensive treatments. "We are worried that most companies are only interested in treatments for Western travelers," says WHO's Win Gutteridge, who helped put the proposal together.

The proposal involved setting up a not-for-profit company that would screen and develop new treatments over an initial 7-year term. Industry would stump up the lion's share of the cost, and any profits would go back into the company to help meet running costs and begin to become self-financing. "It's quite a new idea to develop collaborations between companies," says Gutteridge. "The novelty may be part of the proposal's problem." The proposed company would have worked in parallel with the new Multilateral Initiative on Malaria (MIM), an attempt to coordinate the research efforts of several public and private funding bodies, including the U.S. National Institutes of Health, WHO, the Wellcome Trust, and France's Pasteur Institute (*Science*, 21 November, p. 1393).

Following the Geneva meeting, Simon Sargent of Glaxo Wellcome, one of the proposers, sent a brief fax to Gutteridge. He reported that the industry leaders concluded: "The underlying issues are difficult and complex and need further examination." They also pointed out that "there are drugs and vaccines for malaria already in development within the pharmaceutical industry," and that there is a need to explore further what work is being done. For example, Glaxo Wellcome is planning trials of a new drug, Malarone, in Africa ahead of a potential donation of 1 million treatment doses per year in the region.

Malaria researcher Brian Greenwood of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine says researchers were very disappointed by the companies' decision: "We really thought industry was wanting to help." Harvey Bale, director of the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Associations in Geneva, says there were "very serious obstacles" to moving ahead with the proposal. "There are a number of problems at the business level, and we've some very substantial questions," he says. "And the cost of the project is high for some companies."

The decision is a blow to the newly formed MIM, which had hoped to work alongside the proposed public-private partnership. Gutteridge says MIM will still go ahead, but it has not been helped by the companies' decision. He is, however, still optimistic that a solution can be thrashed out: "I'm not surprised they want to examine the underlying issues further. There's a lot of research going on, and maybe there are things we don't know about." The proposers plan to discuss the decision with company representatives to look for a way forward. "Our bottom-line hope is that the proposal isn't dead," says Gutteridge. "We had such a good initial response."

–Nigel Williams

LAB HAZARDS

Spiked Coffee Prompts Police Inquiry

It's enough to make a scientist swear off coffee. Last month, six researchers at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Medical Center fell ill after swigging coffee at a lab meeting. The cause: Their drinks were laced with acrylamide, a neurotoxic chemical used in molecular biology labs. All six were treated in local hospital emergency rooms and returned to work the same day. But that wasn't the end of the story: When tests revealed that the amount of chemical in the coffee seemed too high to be accidental, campus police began a criminal investigation 2 weeks ago.

The poisoning occurred on the morning of 5 November in a conference room of the Medical Center's Cellular and Molecular Medicine East building. According to several sources, the researchers who drank the tainted coffee worked in the lab of cell biologist Don Cleveland, although Medical Center spokesperson Nancy Stringer said members of several labs were at the meeting. Cleveland declined to comment. The victims—two grad students and four staff members—experienced "light-headedness" and "blurry vision," the center said in a statement.

Tests of coffee from the meeting room revealed that it contained acrylamide, a white, water-soluble crystal that's used to make gels for protein analysis. Although trace contamination might have occurred by mistake, say, when someone cleaned a coffee pot with a towel that had been used to wipe up acrylamide solution, that seems unlikely. The levels of acrylamide were far above trace amounts and "could not be explained" by an accident, says UCSD police detective Robert Jones.

Acrylamide can cause the body's potassium levels to drop and permanently damage the nervous system. The amount in the coffee was estimated at about one-tenth of a lethal dose, however, Jones says. And although the long-term effects from a single exposure to acrylamide haven't been well studied, neurotoxicologist Jean Harry of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences says that because the victims ingested the poison, they likely became nauseous before they could consume enough to suffer serious harm.

The university had reported no suspects earlier this week and was "conducting interviews and collecting evidence," according to Stringer. The poisoning thus remains a mystery—the most recent in a string of suspected poisonings in research laboratories, many of them still unsolved. Two years ago, for example, several scientists at the National Institutes of Health and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were found to have ingested the radioactive isotope P-32, and in 1994, 15 researchers at Rockefeller University in New York City got sick after drinking coffee laced with sodium fluoride. About 15 years ago, several people at the San Diego biotech company Quidel Corp.—including CEO David Katz—drank coffee that had been doped with acrylamide. A chemist at Quidel was convicted of the crime.

"For the next 2 years, there will be jokes about drinking coffee, but the sad side is, it's a really vicious way of taking revenge," says UCSD immunologist Maurizio Zanetti, who as an employee at Quidel helped identify the poison in that case. Zanetti suggests that anxiety over funding may have prompted someone to act irrationally. The UCSD police, however, say it is too soon to draw any conclusions. Like a good investigator, Assistant Police Chief Jay Dyer says "All ... possibilities have to be looked at."

–Jocelyn Kaiser