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Putting the Squeeze on Elephantiasis

A dreaded tropical disease marked by grossly swollen limbs and genitals may someday become a historical footnote. Pharmaceutical giant SmithKline Beecham and the World Health Organization (WHO) earlier this week announced an ambitious joint project to eliminate the disabling scourge—called lymphatic filariasis, or elephantiasis—by the year 2020.

Some 120 million people in 73 countries are infected with lymphatic filariasis, caused primarily by the parasitic worms *Wuchereria bancrofti* and *Brugia malayi*. The adult worms lodge themselves in the lymph vessels, damaging them and the kidneys and often producing elephantiasis, a swelling of arms, legs, or genitals. The worms produce larvae in the bloodstream that are ingested by mosquitoes, which then transmit the larvae to other people.

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Global de-worming. *Wuchereria bancrofti*, one parasite targeted by effort to eliminate elephantiasis.

Experts say the most promising strategy for wiping out the disease is to destroy the parasites. Toward that end, SmithKline Beecham is donating to WHO 5 billion doses of the drug albendazole, worth about $500 million. Participating countries will help pay for staff to distribute albendazole as well as locally produced or generic versions of two other drugs—diethlycarbamazine and ivermectin—that kill the larvae.

Eradicating the disease is "a fantastically exciting prospect," says Juliet Fuhrman, a filariasis expert at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. But the task won't be easy. It takes up to 5 years of annual treatments to purge worms from an individual's lymphatic system—a daunting challenge considering that many prospective patients live far from clinics. "The question is," says Fuhrman, "Can you treat people long enough to abolish further transmission?" The answer may come at least 20 years from now, after countries start disbursing the drugs later this year.

Indian Scientists Claim Lab Corruption

Fed up with alleged corruption and mismanagement in India's biggest civilian scientific agency, some Indian researchers are taking their complaints to court. Last week, the All India CSIR Scientific Workers Association (SWA), which represents almost 5000 scientists, submitted a 1600-page lawsuit to the state of Delhi's High Court against the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR).

The suit contends that embezzlement, favoritism, and scientific misconduct are rife at CSIR, a conglomerate of 40 national laboratories with some 8000 scientists and an annual budget of about $100 million. "Approaching the judiciary was the only option left, as CSIR had not cared to respond to complaints till now," says SWA's general secretary, organic chemist Maringanti Bapuji. The union hopes that the courts—which are often asked to investigate allegations of government corruption—will order CSIR to streamline and reform its management, freeing up more money for research.

To back up its claims, the SWA's court petition details many specific charges, including alleged plagiarism of published scientific papers by a senior scientist at the Regional Research Laboratory in Bhubaneswar. The union also claims that one lab director appointed, without adequate review, his son and daughter-in-law as scientists in his own institute.

CSIR spokesperson Tulsi Das Nagpal claims that "the charges leveled are vague and baseless, and [CSIR] will file a response in the court if the court so desires." The court is expected to announce whether it will review the charges in the next few days.

WHO Gets New Head

The World Health Organization (WHO) this week chose a new leader: Gro Harlem Brundtland, former prime minister of Norway, was nominated by WHO's 32-member executive board to be director-general. Brundtland, the first woman to head WHO in its 50-year history, beat out four other contenders after four rounds of secret balloting.

Although Brundtland, 58, is a physician, most of her experience has been outside the public health sphere—she led Norway for three terms and earlier served as its environment minister. But she is known as a gutsy, outspoken politician and received strong backing from Western countries, notably the United States, which contributes 25% of WHO's yearly $420 million regular budget. "She is superbly qualified to lead the WHO into the next century," says George Moose, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva. WHO staffers are also thrilled with the choice. "We're celebrating," says one program director.

Brundtland, expected to be formally confirmed by the World Health Assembly in May, will need all the gutsiness she can muster to reform an organization that many observers believe has lost its compass (*Science*, 9 January, p. 166). She said one of her primary tasks will be "to institute internal reforms." Brundtland also wants to raise the profile of health issues and to attack poverty.

Hopkins's Genetic Database to Close

Buffeted by the shifting winds of human genome research, government officials have decided to close an 8-year-old collection of human gene maps maintained by Johns Hopkins University. The database has outlived its usefulness, its sponsors say.

The $6.5-million-a-year Genome Data Base (GDB)—funded mainly (80%) by the Department of Energy (DOE)—was initially conceived as a resource for sequencing the human genome. GDB's Internet-accessible files contain descriptions of human genes, maps of genome regions, genetic "markers" to help guide researchers, and 1.5 million "clones"—short human DNA sequences inserted into bacterial plasmids—that provide what are called "physical maps" to the genome. The GDB is used today primarily by gene hunters and other researchers who focus on specific areas of the genome.

But this disparate data collection, reflecting the styles and standards of the researchers who donated the holdings, is not being used by large-scale sequencing centers, says DOE spokesperson Dan Drell. DOE is now concentrating resources on these big sequencing centers, which construct their own maps. Drell says DOE decided last month to terminate the project but to keep a static version of the archive at DOE's Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee.

Even before DOE's decision was made public, says GDB's chief, Stan Letovsky, company recruiters raided GDB's bioinformatics staff last fall, reducing it from 35 to 20. GDB still has loyal users, however, and many are upset. "Genome mapping and positional cloning activities use this tool heavily," says one GDB fan in France. "The funding agencies have made a serious strategic error." Letovsky says he would like to rescue GDB, but hasn't yet found anyone who can pick up the tab.