

Briefings

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Treating AIDS With Worts

The first clinical trial of a new anti-AIDS drug derived from the plant genus *Hypericum* (better known as Saint-John's Wort) has been started by Fred T. Valentine and Howard Hochster, researchers at New York University Medical Center. The trial will involve about two dozen patients, and is designed to test the safety of the drug. Laboratory tests suggest it will be a useful adjunct to available therapies.

Preclinical research at NYU has shown that the drug, hypericin, can prevent uninfected T-cells from being infected with the AIDS virus in cell culture (*Science*, 21 April 1989, p. 287). Hypericin is a virucidal agent, meaning it can precisely target new virus particles and prevent them from infecting other cells. The only two drugs currently approved for treating HIV infection—AZT and ddI—work by interfering with the key viral enzyme, reverse transcriptase. Since hypericin does not appear to affect reverse transcriptase, and animal tests show that it has low toxicity at therapeutic doses, researchers hope it will not only work on its own, but also have a synergistic effect when taken with either of those drugs.

Hypericin was originally synthesized at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot, Israel. It is being manufactured by VIMRx Pharmaceuticals, Inc. of Stamford, Connecticut.

Genetic Bill Vetoed

California won't be getting the nation's most far-reaching law prohibiting genetic discrimination after all: Although the state legislature passed the measure by a large margin, Governor Pete Wilson vetoed it on 14 October.

The bill would have amended

existing civil rights laws to outlaw discrimination on the basis of "genetic characteristics" (*Science*, 27 September 1991, p. 1484). It would also have imposed an 8-year moratorium on the use of genetic test results by health insurers and limit the use of such information in life and disability insurance.

Wilson, a Republican, said he supported the insurance provisions, as they would encourage people to take genetic tests needed to make important personal decisions. But he balked at expanding the civil rights laws, essentially because doing so would increase the cost of doing business. Wilson told the legislature that the bill represented "a remedy for a problem whose nature and magnitude are not yet sufficiently defined. Employers fearful of exorbitant health care costs should not be regarded as bigots to be prosecuted." An aide to the bill's sponsor, Lloyd Connelly, says Connelly will probably introduce a new version of the bill that addresses just the insurance issue.

Fish Research Stock in Jeopardy

Is it yet another case of Small Science being driven out by Big? The Small Science in question is not only quite small but also fishy: swordtails and platyfish, which provide models for research into tumor formation and sexual behaviors. For half a century the New York Aquarium has maintained a stock center for these fish, which are of the genus *Xiphophorus*. The center, which currently has 10,000 fish and 62 strains, is the main source of *Xiphophorus* specimens for U.S. researchers.

But earlier this year, the aquarium announced that it was closing down the center at the end of the year. The aquarium, run by the New York Zoological Society, has been retrenching on its research activities for some years for budgetary reasons. Now, the fish may go to another institution or be dispersed to labs around the coun-

try. If the latter occurs, says geneticist Don Morizot of the University of Texas Cancer Research Center in Smithville, it will spell "the demise of the system in the long term."

Morizot says that although the facility is "the Jackson Lab of *Xiphophorus*," it's hard these days to find support for such colonies "if they aren't rats or mice." Perpetuation of small, specialized stocks is chancy in the absence of a "major institutional commitment." The stock center is indeed small: It has been run by 63-year-old fish geneticist Klauss Kallman with the aid of a single technician. Kallman, who has been forced to retire, has been supplying about 26 labs a year with platyfish and swordtails, which are among the small handful of fish species that are major sources of biomedical models. The fish, which Kallman says are the "best investigated" vertebrates after mice and men, are used for the study of the evolution of sexual behavior as well as genetically controlled tumors and aging.

Although the facility lost NIH support in 1987 because it didn't have enough customers (NIH required at least 50), Kallman says research on

Xiphophorus is a "very, very active field"—witness the fact that the Germans plan to put fish on the space shuttle so they can study their endocrinology and bone formation.

Selling Shares in the SSC?

U.S. science officials have tried many different ways of inducing the Japanese to kick in big bucks for the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC). For the past couple of weeks, White House and Department of Energy (DOE) science types have been in Tokyo to offer the Japanese a new inducement: a management role in the supercollider. In essence, they told the government that if it antes up \$1 billion toward the SSC, it will get a substantial role in managing the \$8.25-billion accelerator.

But it's far from clear exactly what the Japanese are actually being offered. Last month, presidential science adviser D. Allan Bromley told the newsletter *Science and Government Report* that the U.S. would offer Japan an "equity stake" in the SSC—something akin to selling shares of stock in the

Commuter Shuttle

Although NASA pours nearly \$3 billion a year into space shuttle operations, its temperamental fleet has a poor record for reaching orbit on schedule. Scrambling for more time in space per buck, NASA thinks it's found an answer: a Yugoslav-sized shuttle called the Personnel Launch System. About a quarter of the size of the space shuttle, it would transport 10 people (but not much more luggage than their toothbrushes) to and from low earth orbit. The wee shuttle's main tasks would be to rotate space station crews, service orbiting satellites, and make emergency rescues. The Lockheed Advanced Development Company in Burbank, California, has received \$1.67 million from NASA to conduct a feasibility study. "This could be the people-moving part of the new National Launch System NASA and the Air Force are planning," says program manager Dave Urie of Lockheed. But don't pack your toothbrush yet: Congress cut nearly all money for the advanced launch system earlier this month.

