Briefings

edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

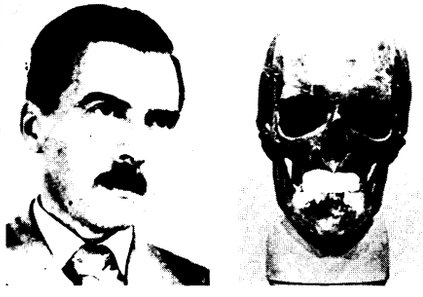
Mengele's DNA

In the next few months, British researchers may finally determine whether bones exhumed from the Embu cemetery in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in 1985 are those of Josef Mengele, the infamous "Angel of Death" of Auschwitz. Dental records suggest that they are, but Israeli authorities have disputed the findings. Now genetic fingerprinting is being enlisted to settle the matter.

Molecular biologist Alec Jeffries of Leicester University, who pioneered genetic fingerprinting, has used DNA extracted from the bones by Oxford University researchers to make a DNA fingerprint. But to prove the bones are those of the SS officer, Jeffries needs DNA from Mengele's known relatives, especially his son, Rolf Mengele. Mengele, who runs a law practice in Freiburg under the name Rolf Jenckel, had initially refused to give a blood sample, but he changed his mind after German prosecutors in the war crimes department threatened to exhume bones of his father's dead relatives to obtain more DNA.

A positive match would confirm that the skeleton buried at Embu is indeed that of Mengele, who escaped to South America after the war and supposedly died in a swimming accident in Brazil in 1979. A negative result would not be definitive, however. The bone DNA might be contaminated, or Josef might not have been Rolf's biological father. "There would always be residual worries," says Jeffries. Rolf Mengele's blood should be with Jeffries in a week or two, but Jeffries is in no hurry. "We've been waiting a year and a half for this blood sample," he says. "I'm not going to rush it or do it in the public eye."

BETTMANN ARCHIVES



Josef Mengele and skull believed to be his.

Dystrophy Gene Defect Spotted

Scientists from research teams in Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United States have linked a specific genetic defect to myotonic dystrophy, a form of muscular dystrophy that afflicts about one in 8500 people.

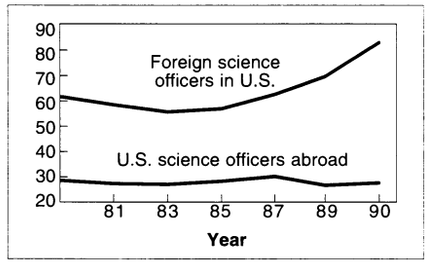
At a press conference held at the Department of Energy, the finding, reported in three papers in the 6 February issue of *Nature*, was trumpeted as "one of the first tangible fruits from the Human Genome Initiative." Geneticist Robert Korneluk of Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario describes the discovery as a "major diagnostic breakthrough" that will make it much easier to identify individuals who have the disease. New therapies are still quite a way off, he says.

Researchers identified the genetic defect, an enlargement of a segment of DNA on chromosome 19, with the aid of DNA probes provided by molecular geneticist Pieter de Jong and colleagues at the Human Genome Center at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. They have not yet identified the actual gene affected, but de Jong says they expect to do that any time now. This marks only the third time that expansion of a region of DNA has been implicated in a heritable disease. Last year researchers found similar enlarged segments in fragile X syndrome and X-linked spinal-bulbar muscular atrophy.

What's particularly interesting about the myotonic dystrophy defect is that it becomes more pronounced in each succeeding generation that inherits it—a finding that at long last explains why the disease appears to become more severe with each generation, the researchers said.

Getting Science Into Foreign Policy

When Department of Energy (DOE) officials went to Japan last fall to try to drum up Japanese contributions to the Superconducting Super Collider, they provided "an extremely clear example" of the United States' failure to integrate science with foreign policy, says Rodney Nichols of the Carnegie Commission on Science, Technology, and Government. DOE approached Japan "as if this was the only issue" between the two countries, rather than dealing with the larger political and economic context, Nichols contends.



U.S. science diplomats abroad actually decreased during the '80s.

The Carnegie Commission attempts to address this type of problem in a new report* that calls for a "scientific revolution for the conduct of U.S. diplomacy." Nichols, former vice president of Rockefeller University, chaired the group that authored the report, which outlines ways in which the government—especially the State Department—can make its operations more "technologically literate." For starters, the secretary of state should have a science and technology counselor. And the department needs more career foreign service officers with technical expertise. The report claims the department has only four science and technology officers in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—whereas there are 34 French, German, and British technical experts at missions in Washington. As for the rest of the government, the commission calls on President Bush to initiate a government-wide review of all international dimensions of science and technology, with an eye to "mainstreaming" these issues into the programs of mission agencies.

*The report, "Science and Technology in U.S. International Affairs," is available from the Carnegie Commission, 10 Waverly Place, New York, N.Y. 10003.

Fairy Tale Prize for Nobel Noncontenders?

Is your subject one of the ugly ducklings of the science prize world? Feeling spurned by the Nobel committee just because ecology, astrophysics, or even biochemistry were not real subjects, like medicine, physiology, and chemistry, when the Nobel Foundation was set up in 1900? Well, a fairy tale ending may be in store for you in the shape of the Hans Christian Andersen prize.

The prize is the brainchild of Danish businessman Joergen Rossen—who last year opened a Hans Christian Andersen museum in Copenhagen. Initial support has come from the Danish government and the Jacobsen Biomedical Foundation. The Nobel Foundation is also offering advice—its director, Baron Stig Ramel, came to Copenhagen last week for discussions with Rossen.

Ecology seems certain to be the subject for the first prize, which is to be awarded in either April or September 1993. Future categories are likely to include biochemistry (not chemistry, which the Nobel has sewn up) and astrophysics. The Nobels will supply the procedural model for the new prize—and the money must be Nobel scale too, says Rossen. The aim is to make each prize 6 million Danish crowns, or close to $1 million.