Briefings

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McKnight and Tjian Go Fishing

At any big meeting of molecular biologists these days, you can't throw a test tube without hitting somebody who has a big stake in a biotech firm. What's not so common, however, is for a top academic researcher to give up his academic lab altogether and head for the profit sector.

Steve McKnight

That's why the molecular biology community has been buzzing in the past few weeks over the news that Steve McKnight will leave the Carnegie Institution of Baltimore to become scientific director of a biotech startup whose other principals are Robert Tjian of UC Berkeley and David Goeddel of Genentech.

McKnight's departure from Carnegie came as a surprise in part because he's considered one of the very top researchers in the field of gene transcription, which will form the scientific basis of the new company, Tularik, scheduled to open its doors in south San Francisco next August. The move was doubly startling because McKnight has become a symbol of "small-lab science" at its best—a hands-on guy who still works at the bench alongside his carefully chosen group of postdocs and students.

That kind of benchwork doesn't usually go along with being the scientific director of a corporation. McKnight says, however, that he intends to be found working elbow to elbow with the other scientists at Tularik just as he was in his own lab.

The company will focus on transcription factors—the gene-regulating proteins that both Tjian and McKnight have devoted their careers to studying. Its approach, says McKnight, will be to discover drugs that target these factors. The goal is to develop new treatments for heart ailments, viral diseases, cancer, and other disorders, which will treat diseases by turning off the genes that cause them or activating genes that can reverse them.

Tularik's unusual name comes from the Alaska River that is Tjian and Goeddel's favorite fishing spot. In giving it that name, they clearly were hoping to bring in a good catch—and in hooking McKnight they've got a bigger fish than they had any reason to expect.

Koprowski Sues Wistar Institute

Immunologist and vaccine specialist Hilary Koprowski has filed suit against Philadelphia's Wistar Institute, claiming that the organization, where he has worked for 35 years, improperly removed him as director. The charge is related to prior age discrimination complaints he has filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and a state agency.

Koprowski argues that he is still scientifically productive and that age is the only reason he was removed and replaced by Giovanni Rovera, an oncologist at the institute. His suit claims that he never received a negative performance review in his tenure as director before the Wistar board of managers demoted him a year ago to the rank of a tenured "institute professor."

Koprowski has an impressive scientific résumé that includes development of the first safe and effective oral polio vaccine, an important modification of the rabies vaccine, and an immunotherapeutic serum for gastrointestinal cancer. In his suit, Koprowski argues that since he took the helm in 1957, Wistar has been transformed from a six-lab, 11-scientist outfit into a world-class institute with 50 labs and 195 staff scientists and postdocs.

Wistar has filed a response denying any procedural or legal improprieties but refused further comment to *Science*. Recent press reports, however, have quoted institute officials as saying Koprowski was forced out for management and budgetary reasons.

The Polish-born Koprowski, a member of the National Academy of Sciences, has quite a few supporters in his corner. After his demotion last year, 10 eminent colleagues—including Nobel laureates James Watson and Baruj Benacerraf—co-signed a letter decrying Wistar's "shabby treatment" of Koprowski. They also criticized Wistar for selecting Rovera without a search. One of the things Koprowski's suit demands, in addition to a cash settlement, is that he be returned as director until a "bona fide transition recruitment" takes place.

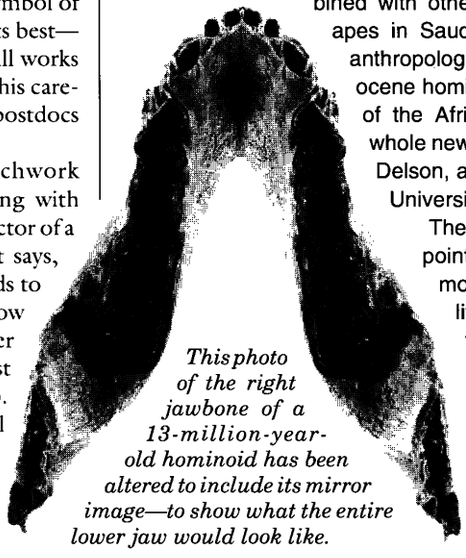
Jaws of Early Life

Anthropologist Martin Pickford of the French National Museum of Natural History had been sifting through the rubble of an old mine in Namibia for barely 15 minutes last summer when he made an extraordinary discovery: the jawbone of a long-extinct ape that may have been a close relative of the last common ancestor of modern apes and humans. Pickford's find could have a dramatic impact on anthropologists' picture of the hominoids—the "superfamily" that includes both apes and human beings.

The mandible, which still has some teeth embedded in it, came from a young adult who lived 13 million years ago, during the Miocene epoch. Now that the discoverers have had time to study the mandible, they say (in *Nature*) that it is the remains of a new species and a new genus of Miocene ape—one that they have named *Otavipithecus namibiensis*, in honor of the Otavi mountains in northern Namibia.

Although Miocene ape bones have been found near the equator in Africa, as well as in Europe and Asia, the find provides a surprise: The apes were also present in southern Africa. "We never expected to find middle Miocene apes there," says expedition leader Glenn C. Conroy, a Washington University Medical School paleoanthropologist. Combined with other new discoveries of Miocene apes in Saudi Arabia and northern Kenya, anthropologists now have evidence that Miocene hominoids lived along the full length of the African continent. "It opens up a whole new area geographically," says Eric Delson, a paleoanthropologist at the City University of New York.

There are still too few fossils to pinpoint when and where the last common ancestor of apes and humans lived, but the new fossil enlarges the area that anthropologists will have to consider. "One could certainly at least begin to entertain the view that the predecessors of the African ape and modern humans may have been in South Africa," says Conroy.



This photo of the right jawbone of a 13-million-year-old hominoid has been altered to include its mirror image—to show what the entire lower jaw would look like.

NASA Mystery Man

President Bush last week announced his choice to succeed Richard Truly as leader of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)—and it was a surprise to almost everyone in Washington, D.C., because the nominee is essentially unknown there. He is Daniel S. Goldin, a manager of space technology programs at TRW who until now has kept the lowest of low profiles. Said to be