

NIH Leak Policy Honored in the Breach

When is a leak not a leak? Answer: when it comes from the head plumber.

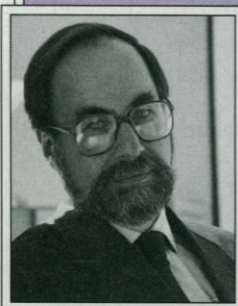
Under orders from director Bernadine Healy's office, NIH scientists and officials have been forbidden to comment on the ongoing scientific misconduct investigation of intramural AIDS researcher Robert Gallo. Since at least last summer, Healy has been on a crusade against leaks from misconduct investigations, and in March she even asked the FBI to find out how some information on the Gallo investigation had been made public (*Science*, 20 March, p. 1503). At the time, sources sympathetic to Healy said she had no choice but to call in the FBI.

Last Sunday, however, *The Washington Post* quoted Healy describing how Gallo responded to charges that he exhibited "noncollegiality" by refusing to share cell lines used in culturing the AIDS virus: "I think that at least the specific issues that were used as evidence for noncollegiality were disputed in a rather effective way by Gallo." The charges Healy was referring to appear in a "proposed final report" by NIH's Office of Scientific Integrity (OSI) and an accompanying report from a panel of consultants to NIH—both of which are still officially under wraps. Healy was unavailable to comment on her apparent violation of her confidentiality order.

Healy's comments are not the only recent leaks with apparent origins in the upper echelons of NIH, however. Just 2 weeks ago, a story in the French newspaper *Liberation* quoted liberally from the OSI report and an accompanying letter by Healy and declared that Gallo had been "absolved." That news report caught the eye of Representative John Dingell (D-MI), who fired off a letter to Healy's boss, Health Secretary Louis Sullivan, demanding to know whether he planned to call in the FBI to determine the leak's source. Sullivan had not replied as *Science* went to press.

Baltimore to Move Across the Street?

David Baltimore, a veteran of the NIH-John Dingell misconduct war over an allegedly fraudulent 1986 paper and winner of a 1975 Nobel Prize, may soon be packing his bags for another move—this time to a new location just across the street from his present laboratory at Rockefeller University in Manhattan.



David Baltimore

Science has learned that the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Research Center is inviting Baltimore to take a position in the molecular biology program, and to bring the members of his lab with him. Baltimore is "definitely interested," according to one Sloan Kettering staffer, and members of Baltimore's lab are said to be already planning how to allocate space in the new quarters. Baltimore was out of the country and unavailable for comment this week.

Sloan Kettering president Paul Marks confirms that Baltimore is a candidate to become a tenured professor at the center, but he cautions that Baltimore's appointment must first win the approval of several review panels, including the board of trustees. The trustees will take up the nomination, which some consider sensitive, at their next meeting, on 28 May.

Calling for Advice on Gene Patents

Acting on the principle that late advice is better than none at all, the federal government is planning to ask the public whether it thinks NIH should continue

blindly attempting to patent fragments of the human genome. Government researchers have already created a furor by filing for patents on hundreds of gene fragment sequences, although in many cases they don't even know

Envisioning Research With Virtual Reality

Virtual reality, until recently considered little more than a high-tech way to train airplane pilots, nuclear plant engineers, and ship and submarine navigators, should soon get a serious research agenda courtesy of the National Research Council (NRC).

Research and development making use of virtual reality is proliferating in many technical fields, including drug design (*Science*, 3 April, p. 45), earthbound planetary exploration, manufacturing, and pilot training. But key questions about the design, development, and use of virtual reality systems remain unan-

swered, according to an NRC "prospectus" on the field drawn up by two expert committees.

NRC officials note that before virtual reality can be used as a serious research tool, it will require better and more uniform hardware and software systems. The impact on humans also needs

what biological function the patents would cover.

Six federal agencies will sponsor a public meeting 21-22 May at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., to discuss "science and technology issues related to federally funded genome research." In addition to getting advice, the agencies also want to lecture the public about the "U.S. intellectual property protection system and technology-transfer laws as applied to genome research and its products."

Many scientists have worried that, if issued, the patents could stifle genome research. Such critics argue that patents will "lock up" genes whose functions haven't been discovered—meaning that a researcher could spend years searching for the gene that codes for a particularly interesting protein, only to learn once he or she obtains the sequence that the government already holds a patent on it. Proponents of the scheme say the patents will be crucial in an increasingly competitive biotechnology arena.

Expect a lively meeting.

exploring, these officials say. How, for instance, will sustained exposure to synthetic environments affect individuals' behavior and physiology?

NRC officials told *Science* that several government agencies have expressed interest in funding the \$595,000 study, including NASA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Army's Human Engineering Laboratory, and the National Science Foundation. Work on the study is expected to begin in the fall.



Virtually there. A student takes a simulated walk through a computer-generated world.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL