

DATABASE

Angling for Viruses

Researchers at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater have released a database that makes it easier to flush out viruses lurking in tissue samples. Launched last fall by virologist Ulrich Melcher and colleagues, VirOligo lists thousands of oligonucleotides, short sequences of DNA that can be used to fish out viral genetic material. The collection should benefit anyone who runs diagnostic tests such as the polymerase chain reaction, Melcher says, because it can be time-consuming to scan the literature for the right oligonucleotide sequence to nail down a particular virus. The expanding database now includes information for a long roster of human and animal pathogens, including those behind AIDS, foot-and-mouth disease, the flu, and polio.

virologo.okstate.edu

EXHIBITS

Wisdom From the Top Docs

The Surgeon General of the United States is supposed to provide the country with the same kind of concerned, thoughtful, sometimes stern advice you get from your doctor. Find out what Surgeons General have prescribed for the nation at this site sponsored by the National Library of Medicine, which offers over 70 reports from the years 1964 to 2000, as well as workshop proceedings, pamphlets, and other documents. The site also features an informative history of the office, which began in 1871 as the director of the Marine Hospital Service—its brief was caring for sailors. As the position evolved from bureaucrat to health advocate, some Surgeons General have used the office as a bully pulpit, and their outspokenness sometimes angered powerful interests. The site gives you a taste of some of these controversies. For example, you can read the famous 1964 report in which Luther Terry indicted cigarettes for causing lung cancer and a host of other illnesses. And you can page through C. Everett Koop's controversial 1986 volume on the AIDS epidemic, which outraged political conservatives by calling for sex education in the schools.

sgreports.nlm.nih.gov/NN

NET NEWS

Link Rot Infests Internet

The first study to measure the survival of URLs confirms what every savvy surfer suspects: Web sites are almost as ephemeral as Enron's profits. At current rates of decay, an educational site has only a 50–50 chance of lasting more than 5 years.

The extent of the problem emerged after biochemist John Markwell of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and colleague David Brooks began designing a Web-rich curriculum for high school science teachers. "Even over the 3 to 4 months of preparation time, it became obvious that some of the links were disappearing," says Markwell. Irrked but intrigued, the researchers began tracking the pace of "link rot," Net lingo for links that are no longer usable because the site they refer to has folded or altered drastically.

Of the 515 educational Web sites Markwell and Brooks began monitoring in August 2000, nearly one-fifth have either vanished or changed purpose. (Several became dens for pornography.) Not surprisingly, dot-com sites showed the highest attrition rate—40%—followed by dot-edu (18%) and dot-org (15%). Markwell says that the rapid turnover frustrates teachers, who quickly learn that they can't rely on these resources. To fight link rot, Markwell suggests that professional societies sponsor the best educational sites in their field. And instead of relying on faculty altruism, universities could reward profs for constructing and maintaining sites.

www-class.unl.edu/biochem/url/broken_links.html



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primates in Print

Need to find the most recent studies on the social life of the Philippine tarsier, a bug-eyed, spindly-fingered primate dwelling in that country's tropical rainforests (above)? How about Jane Goodall's early papers on nest building in wild chimpanzees? Clamber over to PrimateLit, a well-stocked bibliography of primate books, papers, reports, abstracts, and dissertations hosted by the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Each record in this virtual card catalog provides the basic citation info and allows you to easily locate other works by the same author or covering the same subject, geographical area, species, or taxonomic group. You can search the latest entries or prowl the "ancient" literature, which extends back to 1940.

primatelit.library.wisc.edu

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